STARTING ALL OVER AGAIN

Making and Remaking a Living on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua

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Proefschrift
ter verkrijging van de graad van
doctor in de landbouw- en milieuwetenschappen,
op gezag van de rector magnificus,
dr. H.C. van der Plas,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
op woensdag 4 november 1992
des namiddags te vier uur in de Aula
van de Landbouwuniversiteit te Wageningen

Promotor: dr. Norman Long, hoogleraar in de rurale ontwikkelingssociologie

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Twelve long and terrifying hours of wind and rain gave a decisive turn to the project "Regional autonomy and local-level development: the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua," which in the form of this thesis has come, after all, to a happy ending. I would like to thank the people who before, during, and after hurricane Joan, supported and encouraged me to continue my journey and go on with this research.

During more than three years of fieldwork, the people of Bluefields and its hinterland received us with generosity, patience, and friendship. They showed us that with courage, perseverance, and good will it is possible to make a living on the Atlantic Coast despite harsh and hostile conditions. To Ceferina, Brigido, Elizabeth, Camilo, Wilfredo, Maria, Graciela, Calixto, Tomasa, Enoc, Ernesto, their children, and all the others, *muchas gracias y siempre adelante !*

From the beginning, this project was a team effort, carried out with the participation of young Nicaraguan researchers. To Dominga Tijerino, Virgilio Rivera, Sandra Gómez, Kevin Campbell, Noreen White, and Roberto Rigby, I would like to say thank you very much. Your enthusiasm and dedication kept the research going. I hope you learned as much as I did from our team work and experiences. Gabriel Torres helped me by opening the doors to the lively world of trade in Bluefields. *Muchas gracias!*

The project was carried out in close cooperation with the Research and Documentation Center of the Atlantic Coast. I owe all the employees of its offices in Managua, Puerto Cabezas, and Bluefields my gratitude for their support. They showed me the ingenuity and tenacity that is required to run an institution in a country plagued by severe economic problems, a war, and political turmoil, not to mention electricity cuts, gasoline shortages, and deficient means of communication.

The project received funding from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) and the Agricultural University of Wageningen, for which I am thankful.

Ann and Norman Long provided us warm friendship, stimulating intellectual support, and hospitality. Visits with them are always too short.

Gavin Smith not only helped me to improve earlier versions of the thesis, he also guided my first steps in the Canadian world of sociology and anthropology. I thank Sandra Garland for polishing the grammar and putting all the words in the right place.

Family and friends offered us a place in their homes, abundant meals and drinks, and encouragement during our short visits to Holland and Canada. I owe gratitude to my mother Tonny van Oostrom, Wim Hafkamp, Marcel Vernooy, Jacqueline van der Greijn, Marie Dubé, Mariette Pelletier, Elise Gauthier, André Belzile, Brigitte Dumont, and Pierre Viens.

Acknowledgements

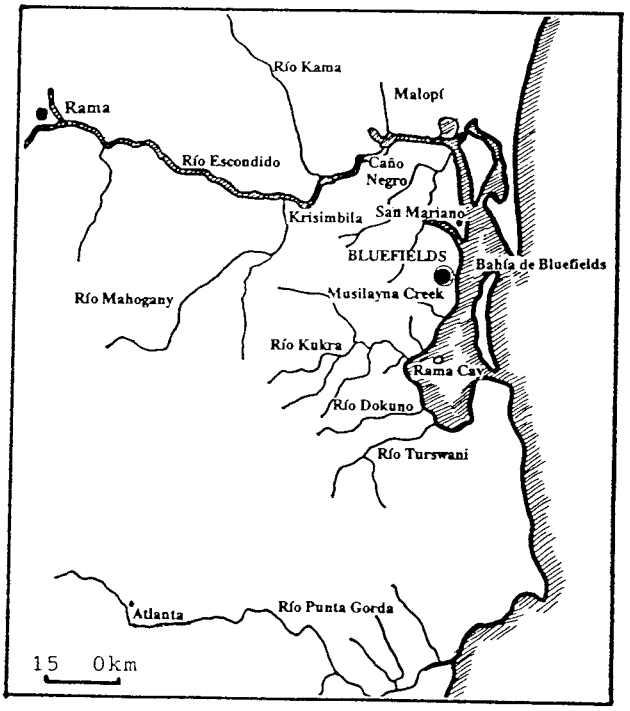
All along the road of this long and sometimes hazardous research journey, Nicole Pelletier, ma compagne de vie, stimulated me to continue the work. One year far away from Wageningen, then in Bluefields, and finally at home in Quebec, Canada, she shared the ups and downs with me. Once more, I would like to say *merci beaucoup!*

The hurricane, unfortunately, was not the only tragic event that occurred during the research project. Our work and life in Bluefields were sadly interrupted by the death of three dear people. In January 1989, my father, Cees Vernooy, died. In February 1990, our Swedish friend and colleague Kristina Tansjö passed away in a hospital in Managua. Two months before we left Nicaragua, in August 1991, Louise Roy, a friend and colleague from Quebec, Canada, died on the Managua-Leon road.

This thesis is written in memory of them.

Hull, Quebec, September 1992

Map of Nicaragua and an enlargement of the study area showing Bluefields and its hinterland.



1. "PLEASE COME BACK TO BLUEFIELDS"

Oh beautiful, beautiful home Bluefields,
teardrops are falling for you.
But I know that tomorrow you will be different,
you will be Bluefields again.
Please come back, please come back to Bluefields,
please come back to Bluefields and me...
Dimensión Costeña "Bella Bluefields"[1]

Introduction

Life (for a researcher) is full of surprises. On the evening of the 21 October 1988, six weeks after I had settled down in the Atlantic coastal town of Bluefields, Nicaragua was hit by a hurricane. For 24 long and memorable hours, "Joan," as it was baptized, raged over the country from east to west, leaving behind a path of desolation, chaos and destruction. Corn Island, the harbour El Bluff, Rama Cay, Bluefields and its hinterland were blown away by the unchained forces of wind and water. Damages in the interior and Pacific departments were considerable. The following morning, when I came out of what was left of Bluefields' cultural centre where we had passed the horrible night, my first thought was that I was happy to be alive. So were the men, women and children with whom I shared this unforeseen and dramatic experience.

Once recovered from the shock, I realized that the coming and going of "Joan" forced us to rethink the research project that we had started only a few weeks earlier. After consulting "home," my co-researchers, the directors of the Research and Documentation Center of the Atlantic Coast in Managua and Bluefields, and Norman Long, I decided not to abandon the work. Inspired by the efforts of the people around us to rebuild what was on the ground and restore what had been lost, we set ourselves the goal of documenting this troublesome process of returning to normal life — becoming beautiful, beautiful Bluefields again, as the song written in memory of the hurricane by the popular local reggae band *Dimensión Costeña* says. Seeing Joan as a social drama of major dimensions, we hypothesized that it could serve as a window on the specific features of the making and remaking of coastal history, as an unexpected, clear view of the key aspects of livelihood in the region. Looking back on the research carried out on the basis of this assumption, I believe that we made the right decision.

Taking the situation created by Joan as a new point of departure, this thesis documents and analyzes a series of interrelations between economic, political, gender and cultural aspects of livelihood on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. I use

the notion of interrelations to emphasize that the cultural construction of meaning and how it works in practice has as much to do with political and economic interests as the political economy is about conflicts over values and symbols. Thus my aim is to criticize simplistic materialist and cultural explanations that tend to reduce social realities to the imperatives of one dimension or a single driving force (Ortner 1984: 148), explanations that also tend to dismiss the multitude of voices in society and history, an important insight that feminist and post-modernist authors have brought to centre stage (Braidotti 1991; Seidman and Wagner 1992). What I am interested in then, is how people attribute meanings to things, events, actions, themselves and others and how these meanings relate to material aspects of personal life and society, without assuming an hierarchical order between culture and material aspects.[2]

I pay special attention to the ways in which the coastal people deal with events that cause major disruption in their efforts to make a living, represented during the last decade by the devastating Contra war (1981-1990), hurricane Joan (1988), and, most recently, the so-called "electoral earthquake" of 1990 that brought an end to eleven years of Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) government. These social discontinuities force us to look at the particular, albeit changing, forms of social organization, political struggle and cultural expression that coastal men, women and children use to solve livelihood problems. In other words, I try to find answers to the question of how the coastal people draw upon certain personal and social resources of a region (and country) whose biography is maybe best characterized as a series of social dramas and discontinuities. Focusing on one particular zone, Bluefields and its hinterland, this thesis is intended to provide a detailed account of how people make and remake their own histories, wiping their eyes to start once again on the road to a better life. The histories contain both similarities and differences as people give different material forms and interpretations to the effort of "starting all over again."

These histories do not stand on their own as, over time, political and socio-economic forces operating outside the area have engendered transformations in coastal society. Although the Atlantic Coast has been and continues to be very much an isolated and unknown region, its population has not remained untouched by the forces of the world economy, international political and military events, and the expansion of the means of communication. Throughout this thesis, we will see how coastal people have felt and dealt with these influences, appropriating, rejecting or adjusting themselves to them.

Before presenting the different issues or problems through which we will look at coastal livelihood and history, I will briefly outline the general sociological approach of our research. To investigate the regional and local forms of livelihood, including planning and policymaking, we have made use of the analytical and methodological framework for regional analysis developed by Roberts and Long (1984), but putting emphasis on the interests, interpretations and livelihood practices of social actors (Long 1984, 1989). This entails documentation and analysis, not only of the social and economic features and impact of production,

distribution and consumption and of the political conditions that influence these, but also of gender and cultural factors that structure how individuals and groups or classes make sense of their worlds and perceive themselves vis-à-vis others within their social environment. It means looking in detail at how people attempt to solve problems and make their own history, individually and collectively, and how the wider social context both constrains and enables them to do this (Giddens 1979: 50-95, 1987: 10-11). In other words, my goal is to contribute to the development of a broad actor-oriented political economy perspective (i.e., embracing the insights of gender and culture studies) applied to regional issues.

To make use of this approach regarding Atlantic coastal society, I assume that the political economy of this region can best be seen as a product of an historical process of specific, locally generated forces and of people's accommodation of and resistance to broader processes of influence that have become and continue to become integral parts of everyday life-worlds. As Long (1984: 8) has argued, when we look at specific regions in Third World societies, such an assumption runs parallel to the idea that the worldwide, historical expansion of capitalism is a highly diversified process. This implies that we should analyze differences between or within areas partly as the result of already existing circumstances and partly as the outcome of the ways in which capitalist forces are influenced by local material, cultural and organizational forms and the actions of particular individuals, groups and classes that are informed by gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and age (Seidman 1992: 47-81). Following Marcus and Fischer (1986: 77-78), we may conclude that such an approach means a challenge — an invitation to experiment — for ethnography, both concerning fieldwork and the writing of a text (a monograph or thesis):

> Ethnography thus must be able to capture more accurately the historic context of its subjects, and to register the constitutive workings of the impersonal international political and economic systems on the local level where fieldwork usually takes place. These workings can no longer be accounted for as merely external impacts upon local, self-contained cultures. Rather, external systems have their thoroughly local definition and penetration, and are formative of the symbols and shared meanings within the most intimate life-worlds of ethnographic subjects.

Although hurricane Joan significantly reshaped the course of our fieldwork, we did not lose sight of the original theoretical framework, methodology and research goals nor the historical and political context in which the project had been and was to be developed.[3] In fact, apart from academic interests, we carried out our work with the intention of contributing to the autonomy process in the region, in which the Research and Documentation Center of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA, Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica) and my co-researchers were energetically involved.

The theoretical and practical implications of the autonomy project and the set of interrelated research topics that were engendered during our fieldwork have been the decisive factors for the elaboration of the theoretical debates upon which

I focus in this thesis. These debates relate to current discussions in Nicaraguan academic and political settings and to discussions in academic circles outside Nicaragua, among others, at the Agricultural University of Wageningen. I return to these theoretical aspects in the last section of this chapter with regard to such questions as policymaking and development planning, commoditization and (agrarian) transition processes. However, first I will explain how this thesis is structured, presenting the dynamics, concrete themes and methodological tools of our research. I hope this will clarify how the fieldwork has informed the theoretical and methodological questions of this thesis as much as theory and methodology have influenced the course of the fieldwork.

Autonomy and the Research and Documentation Center of the Atlantic Coast

In September 1987, the Nicaragua's National Assembly approved the Autonomy Law (*Statute for the autonomy of the regions of the Atlantic Coast*, law number 28 published in *La Gaceta* on 30 October 1987). For the first time in the history of Nicaragua the people from the coastal littoral were granted the specific right to maintain and develop their cultural identities — encompassing language, religion and art — and particular forms of social organization. Moreover, the autonomy law stated that the coastal communities and ethnic groups should participate in the design of (new) plans for the use of the region's natural resources. The plans were to include decisions concerning the reinvestment of profits both in the coastal region and the country at large.[4]

Approval of the Autonomy Law was the result of a complex process of deliberations and negotiations between the FSLN and the people of the Atlantic region. This process had its roots in a series of political and military events that occurred in the period from 1981 to 1983. These events were an expression of different ideas and interests with regard to the Sandinist project of national unity and social transformation of the Nicaraguan society — internally, between the FSLN and the different ethnic groups on the coast and, externally, between the FSLN and the government of the USA which showed an increasingly hostile attitude toward the Sandinists. Faced with an accumulation of conflicts and problems, under pressure by demands from the coastal people and motivated to find a solution, the FSLN government recognized the unique history and nature of coastal society and the need to develop new ideas and implement a particular policy for the region.

In light of this process, the CIDCA, constituted in 1981, came to play a role of importance. Initially focusing on aspects of history and culture, from 1983 onward CIDCA developed an approach that viewed the Atlantic region as a whole, as a socioeconomic formation with special characteristics. Based on this approach, the centre raised a number of research questions concerning the relations between political, socioeconomic and cultural elements. However, its interest was not only basic research. Of equal importance was the collaboration of the centre with government and nongovernmental organizations involved in the design and execution of projects that could improve local conditions, raise technical and political

capabilities of the regional population and stimulate participation of men and women in microlevel plans and programs. After approbation of the Autonomy Law, these goals gained even more significance.

In 1987, within this context, cooperation between CIDCA and the Department of Rural Sociology of the Wageningen Agricultural University was initiated, aimed at strengthening the basic and applied work of the research centre in the fields of socioeconomic research and development planning.[5] Following the guidelines of CIDCA, Norman Long and I began to write a proposal for a research project that would: provide a detailed analysis of regional forms of production; and contribute to the design of regional development plans that would take into account the particular ecological, ethnic and ideological characteristics that are absent in planning models in capitalist market economies. At the beginning of 1988, our efforts resulted in a final proposal entitled "Autonomy and local-level development: the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua."[6] At the end of July 1988, with this document in my suitcase, I travelled to Nicaragua to start the project. After a period of preparation of about six weeks at the CIDCA head office in Managua, I arrived in Bluefields where I was welcomed by colleagues from the regional CIDCA office and by a refreshing tropical rain. Another five weeks passed before Joan changed, once and for all, the research destination.

Research subjects and structure of the thesis

We followed post-hurricane events for three years, from the end of October 1988 to November 1991. The directions in which we looked through our research window and the techniques we used were very much guided by what we saw and by whom we met during this period. In other words, research topics were built upon our second-start interest theme, that is, the various ways in which people dealt with the hurricane and post-hurricane events. Initially, we focused on the area that was most affected by Joan: the Bluefields hinterland. The sequence of research issues, as they were generated in practice (rather than on paper), forms one of the cornerstones of this thesis. In this section, I provide a more detailed account of the nature of this research process and how it informs the logic of this book.

Apart from this introductory chapter and a concluding discussion (Chapter 8), I have divided this thesis into three parts of two chapters each. These six chapters make up a collection of interrelated questions.[7] In Part I, **Making a living in the hinterland**, our attention is on the dispersed rural enterprises and households that can be found in the hinterland of Bluefields. I document and analyze how they tried to reorganize production after the hurricane and how this was influenced by the reconstruction program of the former Sandinist government to deal with the chaos and destruction caused by Joan. In Part II, **Doing business in town**, my focus moves to the urban context of Bluefields. Here, the small-scale commercial activities and enterprises are of main interest. I also look at the fundamental contradictions concerning the attempt of the regional government (elected in 1991) of the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO) to regulate what it called "free trade" in the region

through the creation of a price regulation commission. In two of these four chapters (2 and 4), I take policymaking as a point of departure and explore how politics informs and is informed by economic and cultural elements. In the other two chapters (3 and 5), I begin with the economic organization of livelihood to look at its dialectic interplay with political and cultural elements. As I have stressed earlier, this division should be seen as no more than a technique to examine the questions we have formulated, order the data and search for explanations. We should therefore not lose sight of the complex whole and the interrelations that exist between the parts.

The findings of Parts I and II along with additional collected data bring us to the third part, **Toward a new understanding of coastal history**. My aim here is to contribute to a so far little developed perspective on the process of historical change on the Atlantic Coast in general and in Bluefields and its hinterland in particular. This perspective interprets regional transformations not only in terms of "external interventions" and through the eyes of the interveners, but also in the context of the life-worlds of the coastal people themselves.

Part I: Making a living in the hinterland

In Chapter 2, I look at how men and women in the hinterland dealt with the situation caused by Joan and how they responded to the reconstruction and reactivation plans, projects and measures implemented by the former Sandinist government. My interest is in analyzing how these initiatives were carried out. I will consider the general objectives of the reconstruction program; the ways in which these objectives were interpreted by the different institutions and organizations involved in execution of the program; the way in which concrete actions were undertaken by their representatives; the interactions that took place between the different social actors involved; and the foreseen and unforeseen results of these actions. The timespan covered is from 22 October 1988 to the end of April 1989, a period of about six months, including three months of rainy season (November to January) and three months of dry season (February to April).

The techniques we used to collect data in this period were participant observation, interviewing (of a very open and explorative nature) and situational analysis (van Velsen 1967). Although material conditions in those days were still unfavourable (shortage of food, houses and farms on the ground, threat of epidemics, lack of transport facilities), when and where possible we interviewed men and women farmers in Bluefields or in the hinterland. Interviews centred on how people experienced the hurricane and how they envisaged the wide range of tasks necessary for a return to normal. During the six months we followed, as much as possible, key actors responsible for the execution of different parts of the reconstruction program and interviewed them concerning their experiences and interpretations. We were present at a series of meetings between the rural population and these key actors. The proceedings at these meetings, helped us detect new and old problems people were facing, their various and sometimes conflicting interests and perceptions of the situation and the solutions they

attempted to find, individually and collectively. These meetings also made us aware of the emergent character of different forms of organization, cooperation and conflict that include procedures, rules of the game, types of discourse and cultural categories used consciously or unconsciously by the actors involved in or affected by the reconstruction program. That is, we became aware of many of the crucial features of the social and ecological drama Joan had caused in the area.

In Chapter 3, I present a detailed analysis of the hinterland economy and the ways in which economic activities are linked with the wider political and socioeconomic context. Historically, the hinterland had developed strong ties with the regional economic and administrative centre, the town of Bluefields. Through the ups and downs of the coastal economy, these relations provided direct links with the regional, national, and international market systems, through the sale of agricultural products and labour and the purchase of basic commodities. One of the questions I will deal with in this chapter concerns the actual forms and significance of the interrelations with the market system. However, our interest was broader than distribution and exchange and includes not only the material aspects of these processes, but also the social, cultural, and ideological elements that play a role in their realization.

This chapter builds upon the research and results presented in Chapter 2. Based upon a preliminary general analysis of the area's rural economy, we carried out three detailed case studies of hinterland farm enterprises.[8] Through these cases, we aimed to provide an idea of the variety of enterprises that can be found in the hinterland — a variety informed by the complex and changing nature of their composition, internal and external labour and social relations, and different roles played by male and female members. At the same time, these detailed accounts will help us trace the boundaries of what Braudel (1987a [1979]) has called "the structures of everyday life." In other words, we will explore the possibilities and impossibilities of making a living in the hinterland.

We also intended to provide an understanding of the purpose and meaning that members of these units attach to their livelihood situation, and how this is informed by differences in age and gender. Of special interest is the different forms and degrees of commoditization that can be found in the hinterland economy. This includes the extent to which various non-commodity forms survive and how one might explain this. In relation to these questions, I consider the role of the state and its agrarian reform policy as it is connected to the commoditization process on the Atlantic Coast and the possible transformation of relations of production (as envisioned by the former Sandinist government).

Part II: Doing business in town

In this part our focus moves to Bluefields. One of the basic characteristics of the hinterland economy is the close socioeconomic and political ties many of the rural households maintain with Bluefields. Due to the Contra war, hurricane Joan, and the economic crisis, whole families or groups of household members have settled

in town where they intend to make a living through economic activities, such as small-scale commerce and the preparation of food.

In Chapter 4, I analyze how the new economic adjustment and liberalization policy of the central UNO government and the autonomy project under its regional counterpart were actually carried out. I provide a detailed account of the basic contradictions of the creation of a price regulating commission in Bluefields by the regional autonomous government of the UNO. This measure was carried out in April 1991 as a result of an emerging local conflict over prices of basic food items. Only a week after beginning our research on traders and marketers, this event took us by surprise — a nice surprise this time. After meeting with the research team, we decided to look upon the formation of the commission as a case of policy in the making at the local level. We hoped that studying it would reveal the dynamics and paradoxes of a neo-liberal government regulating free(?) commerce.

The abovementioned conflict arose when market-sellers and merchants in Bluefields continued to raise prices despite the national economic adjustment plan announced two weeks earlier by the UNO government. The plan aimed to help solve the economic crisis by stopping price augmentations and speculation.

I will analyze the reasons given by members of the regional government and price commission for the implementation of this policy. This leads to the question of free versus state-controlled trade and its political implications in the case of Nicaragua in general and the Bluefields region in particular. As in many other Latin American countries, the enormous growth in the number of small-scale economic enterprises has created new political problems concerning the role of the state and control of economic activity on the one hand and the survival practices of small-scale traders, their political ideas, interests, and alliances on the other. In Nicaragua, both the FSLN and UNO have been confronted with the increasingly important political and economic role of the enterprises that now dominate the trade scene in all parts of the country.

I also analyze the ways in which the social actors involved in this question, such as traders, shop owners, politicians, and employees of ministries and the municipality, mobilized resources to negotiate specific economic and political interests, to exert pressure on other "parties" involved, or to sanction people who did not want to follow the rules. This includes the price control inspectors appointed by the commission and their inventive ways of dealing with the measure. Here we are confronted with one of the crucial aspects of social and political relations in the region: *amiguismo*, or the mechanism of friendship (real or faked) based on the exchange of favours. The contradictions of the price control issue are placed within the context of the struggle for influential positions in regional politics and the intent of the authorities to control economic activity.

In Chapter 5, my aim is to analyze the characteristics of the increasingly important forms of local small-scale commerce. Although it is difficult to determine a specific moment at which this boom started, after the hurricane, trade expanded both in the number of people involved and the diversity of operations. Easing of the economic crisis during the three years that followed also contributed to revitalization (other towns and the city of Managua experienced a similar trend).

After describing trade in Bluefields, I will show how the multifaceted commercial operations both inform and are informed by cultural (including gender and ethnicity) and political factors. In short, I analyze the ways in which the world of trade in Bluefields is socially constructed, or "reconstructed" taking into account some specific aspects of supraregional economic and political features and their significance at the local level: the continuing national economic crisis and the change of government in April 1990. Furthermore, I will look at the effects of Joan on trade and the lives of traders.

Throughout this chapter, special attention is paid to the role of women and gender relations in the social construction of trade. Women constitute the vast majority of those involved in this economic activity, both in Bluefields and at the national level. The complexities of the lives of some of these women are explored by highlighting the variety of ways in which they deal with socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors in their attempts to manage livelihood questions. This includes an analysis of the impact of the macro-circumstances and events on the solutions they try to find for themselves and their households. In many instances, their activity is constrained by overloading of the burdens of child-rearing and other domestic commitments and sharpening of the gender divisions of labour, inequalities, and conflicts. However, as we will see, within these same contexts or structures women successfully create space for themselves and carry out their "projects," individually and collectively.

Part III: Toward a new understanding of coastal history

The recent history of the Atlantic Coast has been written mainly as an account of a fragmented series of so-called "external" interventions and their mainly negative consequences for the coastal economy, ecology, and its population. In this account, the "external" interventions by foreign companies in search of vital economic resources, military troups defending political-geographic interests, and the Moravian church with its mission to spread its beliefs and religious practices are described, complemented by stories of interventions by forces from the Pacific region. In general, the latter are captured in the images of the Somocist state and the Sandinist revolution.

Although these descriptions and explanations consider the effects of these "interventions" on the lives of the coastal people, they represent the positions of the various interveners. The problem with this approach is its incapacity to deal with the different ways in which the coastal people have tried to come to terms with the interventions. How people have actively tried and succeeded in shaping their own lives and histories, remains unknown. A complementary approach for understanding coastal history, I would argue, still needs to be developed.

In Part III of this thesis, I aim to contribute to this approach, which should concentrate on the life-worlds of the people and their "projects." The goal is to learn about change through the experiences of social actors imbedded in particular social units and relations. Such an approach requires a different methodology, that

avoids viewing coastal history as a specific movement of forces or stream of events. Research techniques that could help us realize our goal are, for example, various kinds of life-stories, including labour or career stories (Bertaux 1981; Leydesdorff 1987) and the collection and analysis of documents such as diaries, letters, testimonies, files and archives, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, and locally written books.

Unfortunately, Joan made this last task very difficult as she washed and blew away useful material. But there is no misfortune without some good fortune: after the hurricane, CIDCA acquired the rescued archives of the coastal weekly newspaper *La Información* (1917-1979), which turned out to be an unexpected and amazingly rich source of data and articles written and published by coastal people over more than six decades![9] I make use of *La Información* throughout Part III, to provide a second "voice," illustrate an argument, or, in a more substantial manner, as a key source for making a point.

To demonstrate one of the basic features of coastal economic development — its instability and the uncertainties that come with economic ups and downs — and the ways in which the local population has dealt and continues to deal with this, I present in Chapter 6 the multifaceted labour history of Santiago Rivas. Santiago is a coastal man who grew up "in the bush" (his words) working for various coastal lumber companies during Somoza and Sandinista regimes, a banana company, and a cotton hacienda on the Pacific Coast, a Costa Rican hacienda owner, an international group of ecologists, and the state and working on his own as a farmer and trader. Santiago's hard life and struggle for survival represents the uncertainties and difficulties encountered by one individual and his close relatives and the specific solutions found by them to overcome the problems caused by impersonal economic and political forces operating on regional, national, and international levels. At the same time, his story shows us the often ingenuous ways people look for and find solutions, although often temporary.

Santiago's labour history serves as a tool to represent certain characteristic experiences of a man who is part of coastal culture and history. At the same time, I use Santiago's account to explore issues related to the construction and writing of his story. This will tell us something about his particular ideas and values as they came about during conversations and interviews during the fieldwork.[10]

In Chapter 7, I place Santiago's story and the experiences related in parts I and II into a longer and broader historical perspective. Here, I discuss the integration of the Bluefields area into the world economy via the operations of transnational lumber and banana companies. These operation began in the 1880s and, with some ups and downs, reached major dimensions during the 1920s. Of importance here is the role played by "independent" farmers who supplied the banana companies with a significant amount of *oro verde* (these companies also cultivated bananas on their own plantations).

Two other characteristics should be mentioned: compared to neighbouring countries, Honduras and Costa Rica, banana production never reached very high levels, and the production system never achieved a high degree of vertical integration. The absence of a railroad system in the area was a crucial obstacle in

this respect. During these years, Bluefields became a centre of trade and commerce where you could buy everything you wanted as the banana and lumber ships brought in goods from all over the world.

The regional economy was hit hard by the crisis of 1929 and by the military and political upheavals caused by A. Cesar Sandino and his Army of Defense of National Sovereignty. The assassination of Sandino and the seizing of power by the Somoza family heralded the beginning of a new period that began in 1934 and lasted until 1979. During this time, the Somoza family exercised a high degree of control over the country's military, political, and economic structures until it was finally overthrown by the Sandinist revolutionary forces.

One of the important features of this period was the modernization of the Nicaraguan state and economy. The economic changes in the Bluefields area were determined by the coming and going of banana and lumber companies, industrial fishing companies, and the ongoing commercial activities in the expanding town of Bluefields. It is important to point out the role of some of the local companies that managed for some time to fill the "commercial gap" left by the foreign enterprises. The general economic situation was uncertain. As a result of the revolutionary triumph, space was created on the Atlantic Coast for the autonomy project.

Theoretical issues

The original goals and the objectives redefined during the course of our fieldwork raise some important theoretical questions: the consequences of commoditization and the nature and meaning of policymaking. In this section I discuss these issues and their relevance in the Nicaraguan case in general and in the Atlantic region in particular.

The social meaning of policymaking

The autonomy process and related issues of regional and local development planning require, on a theoretical and practical level, a better understanding of the dynamics and complexities of policymaking processes on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. Using an actor-oriented approach, this implies analyzing the different ways in which people construct and reconstruct plans or measures. By (re)constructing policy, I mean designing, propagating, and executing, as well as interpreting, accepting, or rejecting. Hence, I aim to analyze the **social significance** of policymaking, taking into account the fact that in principle it can encompass everybody. This task also implies that we pay attention to the unintended consequences of policymaking and the ways in which people deal with these outcomes. In other words, it involves an examination of the meaning and consequences of policy for the livelihood practices of the people. This entails a search for answers to the following questions: How and why does the reallocation of specific goods, services, rewards, and punishments or the reorientation of rules of behaviour facilitate or hamper the attempts of women and men to make a living? What does

this mean in terms of the power relations between the social actors involved in or affected by policy measures? On the coast, the Autonomy Law unlocked the door to these questions. The hurricane and reconstruction program and the price regulation measure blew this door wide open.

Long and van der Ploeg (1989: 242) provide a synthesis of such an approach for the analysis of what they call "planned intervention" by which they mean mainly the institutionalized setting up of development programs or projects. Given my involvement in discussions with both authors, I will use their contribution as a point of departure.[11] Throughout my discussion of their ideas, I refer to other authors who have provided additional points of analytical interest.

In the first place, the authors argue, we should deconstruct the notion of interventions as discrete and clearly localized activities, i.e., as projects with sharp time and space boundaries (Long and van der Ploeg 1989: 228-230). Interventions are always part of already existing social activities tied to both the state and various interest groups in society. They relate to previous interventions and will influence future plans, projects, and measures. Moreover, they are frequently a focus for inter- and intra-institutional struggles, an element that is often neglected or ignored in theories of policymaking and planning. They are used by the different actors involved in these processes to fight out conflicts over perceived objectives, administrative and political competencies, resource allocation, application of sanctions, and the definition of institutional boundaries.

From this we could deduce that we need to look critically at the relations between the different levels of government and, I would like to add, non-governmental organizations as they extend from centre to periphery, and at the decision-making strength or weakness at these levels. As van Ufford (1988: 18) observes in discussing the highly diverse role of local leaders in various parts of Indonesia:

> The local authorities are in some cases extremely weak, able to hang on only because they ignore official policies, or even block them. In other cases the officials behave as faithful executors of the central views. These differences make it difficult to maintain without qualification the generalized notion of the administration as a relatively well-integrated system. Policy may be executed, ignored, or transformed as it reaches the lower levels. The local offices may or may not be dominated by local or regional power configurations.

Whether we should consider the ignoring or blocking of official policy as weakness remains a question. Notwithstanding, it draws our attention to the fact that policymaking often serves the specific local political interests of individuals, parties, or factions. People use plans or measures to legitimize particular values, norms, and rules of the political game and delegitimize the points of view of opponents. Frequently, the forms in which people present and defend these interests change over time as they are forced to deal with new circumstances. This might result in the reformulation of policies and adjustment of the rules of the game. Decisions may vary from one situation to another; they can be made either

very deliberately or pragmatically.[12] For example, government officials may have considerable discretion in doing their duties and pursuing their tasks as Grindle (1980: 197-223) demonstrates in a study of a Mexican federal agency in charge of regulating prices of basic goods.

A second image that needs deconstructing according to Long and van der Ploeg (1989: 230-233), concerns the assumed separation between the outside(rs) and inside(rs). This notion of separation is created to justify the actions of outsiders to deliver solutions in the form of goods, services, or ideas (knowledge, norms, and values) to insiders who are said to lack these and, therefore, remain in a state of underdevelopment. However, this perception conceals the actual processes of negotiation over material, organizational, and normative resources that constitute planned intervention.

This relates to the image that measures instantly and automatically set in motion desired actions and reactions in the groups toward which the policy is oriented. This image of policymaking is one of a mechanical "top-down" approach that assumes that policymaking precedes the specific results defined in the plan or program — an assumption that also implies that (professional) politicians or planners control the flow of events that have to do with a program, project, or measure. Moreover, it is often assumed that policymaking from the "centre" (in most countries, the capital) operates simultaneously and identically in other regions. However, it may well be that in the "periphery" policymaking has its own dynamic in which new measures are created to respond to particular events that occur at regional or local levels. As such, the notion of a linear and logical policy cycle in which formulation, implementation, and evaluation follow each other is turned upside down (Clay and Schaffer 1984). The studies of van Ufford (1988) and Grindle (1980) are concrete examples of this insight.

The idea of a linear and logical policy cycle denies the fact that policymaking cannot be isolated from the wider social context nor from the particular histories and experiences of the people who together construct the plans and measures. These experiences represent not simply a body of accumulated knowledge that directly or indirectly influences the policy process (Long and van der Ploeg 1989: 230). They also constitute the ways in which people have obtained (or not) crucial material and personnel resources that condition the ways in which they come to terms with "new" policies, programs, or projects (Gavin Smith 1989).

Arce's study (1989: 11-51) on the interactions and interrelations between rural producers and bureaucrats in an irrigation project in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, is a good example of how people's perceptions and actions, individual and collective, are informed by previous experiences. Present-day ideas and behaviour of local peasants concerning the irrigation scheme are coloured by their previous experience with a hostile and violent local landlord and corrupt government officials who obstructed the formation of their *ejido*.

In addition, following an argument elaborated by Moore (1991), men and women may have different relations to the state. Therefore, state structures and policies might have a differential impact on the two sexes and vice versa, i.e., men and women may exercise different influences on state actions and policymaking.

With a reference to studies in Kenya, she observes:

> This is particularly clear in the example of women's self-help groups in Kenya, where the success of the women's groups, and their utility for the individual women involved, depend crucially on the women's ability to negotiate both with their husbands or male kin and with the representatives and institutions of the state. Men also have to negotiate with the representatives and institutions of the state, but their ability to do so is rarely structured by the relations with their wives. This is particularly clear with regard to development policies, which tend to institutionalize men's access to the state, while marginalizing women's access, which continues to be negotiated, to a greater or lesser extent, through their husbands. (Moore 1991: 184)

However, as Braidotti (1991: 182) has stressed, even if women manage to become included in state structures, their condition will not automatically improve: "deeper transformations are required both at the level of the self and of social structures." Long and van der Ploeg's (1989) failure to consider this issue is a serious shortcoming of their contribution.

Finally, the presentation of plans as "new" and, therefore, providing better solutions to problems than previous or existing ones must in its turn be subject to critical analysis. As we will see in Chapter 4, this is of relevance in our analysis of the price regulation measure as a new structural adjustment plan of the UNO government. As we know, during the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, many Latin American governments have turned, either voluntarily or against their will, to market-led development policies. So-called "free-trade," privatization, and reduction of the state apparatus have become the main strategies for adjusting national economies hit by severe and prolonged crises (see Singer *et al.* 1991 and Glewwe and de Tray 1991 on the case of Peru). However, contrary to what we may expect, these liberalizing tendencies do not mean withdrawal of the state as a regulating entity. The execution of adjustment policies might well become a highly complex and contradictory process of state regulation, policy legitimation, and negotiation.

Policymaking, therefore, should be understood in its specific contexts as an ongoing process of transactions and negotiations about vital resources, social rules (authority), and ideas or images (of development). Often, it has a complex and contradictory nature (Long and van der Ploeg 1989: 226; van Ufford 1988: 24). It is a political process of a non-mechanical and non-teleological character. It does not simply or automatically reflect either rational and neutral decision-making by policymakers or the interests of the ruling economic elites in society. At the same time, through these transactions and negotiations, the structural properties of organizations, whether governmental or non-governmental, may be modified. This draws our attention to the emergent forms of social institutions that result from the interplay of intended and unintended consequences of social action (Giddens 1979; Long 1989b: 228) and that might go beyond our capacity to comprehend their nature.

The arguments of Long and van der Ploeg that I have summarized here, provide a useful approach to the study of policymaking processes. However, their pertinent use and particular definition of "planned intervention" tend to weaken their contribution. Although the authors intend to overcome the problems of using structuralistic concepts that are defined from the outset, the notion of planned intervention (even when demythologized) tends to invoke dualistic images of "interveners-intervened"and "external-internalforces" to depict the impact of (state) policymaking processes (von Benda-Beckmann *et al.* 1989: 205-220). A similar thinking relies on the rigid division between state and society, and separates politics from economy. Based on the observation that social actors can become "interveners" in certain contexts and "intervened" in others, I believe that these notions — even when put in brackets — become problematic when concrete, changing, and contradictory situations are being studied. Only an analysis of the actual use of policy resources will provide us with an insight into the impact on the (re)structuring of social relations and the intricacy of power/knowledge, control, and dependency. I, therefore, think that the concept of intervention/"intervention"is not very helpful for our purpose.

The debate on commoditization[13]

The statements in the Autonomy Law on the access to and use of natural resources and distribution of possible benefits raise the questions of how production and commercialization are actually organized and whether transformations in the forms of organization are required. These questions should be placed within the historical process of uneven capitalist "development" that the country and the Atlantic Coast in particular have experienced. In the country at large, these issues have been discussed since 1979 in debates on which the former Sandinist government built its agrarian reform policy. One of the central aspects of these discussions concerned the role of the peasantry on the envisaged road to a mixed economy and, eventually, to a society predominantly based on socialist principles. In Part I, I will return in more detail to the Nicaraguan case. Here it suffices to observe that the subjects of these disputes parallel the polemics about commoditization and its impact on rural societies, both in Latin America and on other continents.

By commoditization, I mean the process in which items, be they objects, land, water, labour, or services, obtain a certain exchange value, usually defined in monetary terms (see Long 1986: 9, with reference to the writings of Karl Marx). The expansion of this process takes place through an increase in the exchangeability of an item for more and more other things and by making an ever-growing number of items more widely exchangeable (Kopytoff 1986: 73). This may eventually lead to what Marx called "generalized commodity production." It is important to look at the precise moments, places, and social conditions in which commoditization takes place. This means looking not only at the production stage, but also at possible distribution and consumption (Appadurai 1986: 13). During their trajectories, items may move into and out of the commoditized sphere which Appadurai (1986: 27) describes as diversions of items.

The focus of analyses of commoditization is the impact of increasing commercialization and integration of farming enterprises into the wider capitalist economy. The core questions are in which forms and to what degrees do relations of (re)production become commoditized, voluntarily or against the will of the rural population involved and how does this shape or reshape specific forms of production. As such, the commoditization approach tends to overcome the shortcomings of either strongly dualistic interpretations such as the articulation of modes of production theories or opposing viewpoints such as Leninist versus Chayanovian models of agrarian change (Bernstein 1986: 3-4; Long *et al.* 1986: 1-2), which have played an important role in the Nicaraguan discussion. The approach aims then, through a detailed examination of concrete situations or cases (countries or regions), to show how commoditized relations and market exchange shape and reproduce specific forms of production as parts of a complex capitalist social formation or a society in transition to capitalism.

Commoditization exercises pressure on the productive cycle of the farming enterprise, making it increasingly dependent on the marketing of crops, goods, or labour to satisfy the basic needs of livelihood (Long 1986: 10). In regions where agricultural production has already become highly commercialized, enterprises may become dependent on banks, international companies, and the state for capital to purchase production inputs. In both cases, the commoditization model assumes that the decision-making process at farm-level becomes constrained or even determined by the demands of external economic forces and institutional structures, thereby destroying the presumed autonomy of the enterprise/household unit. In the case of Nicaragua, instead of analyzing the consequences of these processes and the way people experience and deal with the effects, various authors have used this element to engage in an endless and fruitless classifying contest to determine the percentages of proletarianization of producers who face this pressure.

Some models anticipate a strong individualization of enterprises/households in terms of the (re)production process (Long 1986: 16). Forced by the expanding process of commoditization, units are placed into direct competition with other similar entities. It is argued that this does not lead to the partial or complete destruction of the autonomous decision-making process at farm-level, but rather to a rural environment in which enterprises or households confront each other in the market in their struggle for survival (see, for example, the work and model of simple commodity production developed by Friedmann 1980, 1981).

Others predict that commoditization will lead to clearer patterns of socioeconomic differentiation among the inhabitants of rural areas (Long 1986: 11). In general, authors distinguish two directions in which this might proceed. Some argue that it causes the polarization of classes with a small number of agrarian capitalist enterprises opposing a growing mass of rural workers and marginalized peasants (here we recognize the Leninist model, de Janvry 1981). Others defend a more complex social panorama in which small-scale peasant and simple commodity forms of production continue to play an important role (Gibbon and Neocosmos 1985). In the Latin American context, a similar argument has been made by

Lehmann (1986), who introduced the concept of capitalized family farm units in which capital is used in relatively large amounts and labour hired only in small quantities or during peak periods. He illustrates his point with a study of the Ecuadorian province of Carchi. In the Nicaraguan debate, in contrast to the earlier mentioned models, Baumeister (1989: 129-130, 141) has developed a similar argument with regard to both the pre- and post-1979 situation. The critique of dualistic and functionalistic interpretations, applied to the Latin American debate on agrarian transitions, is well summarized by Llambi (1990):

> In this historical sequence, elements of continuity between the former productive-and-exchange forms and present-day structures were detected, along with evidence of radical ruptures with the social structures of the past. The whole historical process was coloured by the criss-crossing (and sometimes conflicting) paths of multiple agents variously linked in complex webs of relationships. There has been no single "road" to agrarian capitalism in Latin America, nor necessarily binary oppositions between polarizing "structural" categories: landlords versus peasants, agrarian bourgeois versus landless proletarians, etc.

A fourth point concerns the influence of the state and its policies on commoditization (Long 1986: 14). In colonial and post-colonial states, government or ruling elites often promote the expansion of commercialization, taxation, and the production of cash-crops for the world market. After the second world war, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and several regional development banks appeared on the scene to push these processes further (Bernstein 1981, 1985). Actually, there is almost no Third World country whose economic options are not conditioned or constrained by its ties with these institutions.

Emphasizing these aspects, the commoditization approach intends to go beyond the theoretical and empirical limitations of various Marxist and neo-Marxist models that deal with agrarian questions and capitalist development. However, the approach has some weaknesses, which I will enlarge upon.

Shortcomings

Long's (1986: 22-23) critique can be summarized as follows. In the first place, there is a lack of attention to and understanding of the precise composition of basic operational units, whether and how they change over time, and how they actually operate. Differences in the constitution and functioning of these units must not only be documented, but require an explanation. This point receives support, for example, from Brass (1990: 448-452), who observes that peasant households are often differentiated in terms of economic interests, access to crucial resources, levels of accumulation, political aspirations, and cultural values. Brass suggests that they do not always constitute an uniform category because they are not all exploited by capitalism in the same way (being poor and inefficient producers) nor are they all able to outcompete capitalists (being efficient producers).[14] Related to this point is the observation that we find ever more cases in which producers form part,

voluntarily or by necessity, of sometimes complex horizontally or vertically integrated units that surpass the level of the farm or household. In Nicaragua, examples of these units are state production units, various kinds of cooperatives, and work collectives. Elsewhere, people are involved in credit networks or contract arrangements with national and transnational companies.

A second and key critique focuses on the failure to analyze thoroughly the role of non-commoditized relations and their intricate interplay with commoditized links. Through access to and use of a wide variety of non-wage labour, non-monetary resources, and social relations based on kinship, friendship, or patronage, rural producers in countries all over the world continue to satisfy basic needs and resolve livelihood problems outside the encircling forces of the market. This is partly due to the often erratic nature of many commoditized relations, which reinforces people's reliance on non-commoditized ties, despite the fact that the latter demand continuous social investment to maintain them. Although, for example, Bernstein (1986: 6) mentions the need to look at the problem of non-wage labour in relation to subsistence, the domestic domain, family reproduction, and what he calls "gender relations of capitalism," he does not pay much attention to these aspects.

A number of authors have tried to overcome this serious failure. Their work is of interest in this thesis. Van der Ploeg (1986: 24-57), for example, argues that the competitive advantage of simple commodity production is largely due to its non-commoditized elements, especially concerning the relations in production. He illustrates this by referring to modern European farming. Gavin Smith (1989, 1985) looks at the community of Huasicancha in the central highlands of Peru. He goes so far as to conclude that the viability of **all** the local enterprises is linked to the use of unpaid labour and other forms of non-commoditized ties. With regard to Nicaragua, I believe that the failure to analyze the importance of non-commoditized relations is one of the main shortcomings of studies.[15]

Closely connected to this problem is the tendency to portray agrarian producers as passive social actors or mere victims of external forces that push them into poverty and marginalization. This denies the active role played by men, women, and children, either in pursuing further commoditization or resisting it. It also tends to look upon people as homogeneous categories. Examining how people shape their life-worlds, or at least try to do so, requires that we analyze not only material elements, but also cultural forms and the ways these inform and are informed by production. This is recognized by a growing number of researchers, e.g., Appadurai (1986). The contributors to this interesting collection of studies focus on how people attribute value to the exchange, consumption, and production of items and how these items, in turn, give meaning to social relations. Although their cases represent goods, such as carpets, cloth, relics, and qat (a small tree whose young leaves, stem tips, and tender bark are used as a stimulant), these authors claim that we can learn from their examples about the everyday economics of more common goods.

The argument that there may exist important differences among operational units should be amplified. Frequently, these so-called units are themselves internally structured by (unequal) socioeconomic, age, and gender relations that, moreover, may change over time. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, whether sharing and

pooling really occurs within enterprises, families, and households. Because of existing divisions based on age, kinship, and gender, men, women, the elderly, and children may not be affected in the same way by commoditization processes, nor can we expect them to react in similar ways. Recently, several authors, including many feminist researchers, have strongly criticized the use of the household concept. For example, Moore (1991: 54-56) stressed the fact that both the composition and organization of households have a direct impact on the lives of women, especially their access to resources, labour, and income. Family labour, representing a common feature of small-scale agrarian and business enterprises, is often a source of conflict between spouses as they attempt to find a balance between the demands of the unit and the time and resources necessary for individual activities and projects. Women have to negotiate constantly with husbands or partners to assert their rights as individuals — rights that have been curtailed on the basis of a gender subordination.

Extending this critique to the concept of household strategy, Wolf (1990: 43-74) analyzes how intra-household bonds between parents and daughters in Indonesia and Taiwan are structured by varying, unequal power relations and struggles over decision-making processes. Taking the case of a rural village in central Java (Indonesia), she found that decisions made by daughters to work in a nearby factory were motivated not so much by collective household needs and strategies, but by individual socioeconomic reasons. This kind of empirical data forces us to rethink the romanticized view that assumes that (poor) families operate on the basis of solidarity and a coherent scheme of economic activities. Lem (1988: 500-529) develops a similar argument using an example from Europe. In her study on small producers in a wine-making community in the Languedoc (France), she argues that parents often make use of patriarchal authority based on age and gender to guarantee the deployment of family labour for the enterprise. Parents and children make up households in which decisions are the result of ongoing negotiations, compromises, and concessions.

On a more general level, I think that we should be careful in assuming that people's actions and reactions are informed by a rational and logical order that is strategic or goal-oriented. Simultaneously and equally important, we should be critical of the ideological use of this assumption. For example, conflicts over objectives, ideas, norms, and interests may not only arise between people; they also might exist within a person. This raises the important questions of how people's subjectivity is formed and reshaped, how strongly it may be informed by, for example, race, class, and gender notions, and how we, as researchers, should perceive and write about people's subjectivity (including, of course, our own). As Collins (1992: 195) pointed out in a critique on what he calls "subjectivistic interpretations" of the human agent: What do we know about non-cognitive processes that influence cognition and perception? What is the impact of emotional processes on this? Which factors might constrain our interpretations? (for similar points, see Ortner 1984: 151-152). Braidotti (1991: 219) formulates this issue in her book on the role of women in philosophy and the gender nature of knowledge/power:

> In a new form of "corporeal materialism," the body is seen as an interface, a threshold, a field of intersection of material and symbolic forces; it is a surface where multiple codes of power and knowledge are inscribed; it is construction that transforms and capitalizes on energies of a heterogeneous and discontinuous nature.

I invite the reader to keep these questions in mind throughout this study.

A second critique concerns the emphasis of commoditization models on material aspects of livelihood, thus neglecting the impact of gender, cultural forms, religion, ethnicity and race, and political expressions that inform the attempts of people to make a living. Regarding politics, this point has been aptly taken by Appadurai (1986: 57, emphasis added):

> *Politics* (in the broad sense of relations, assumptions, and contests pertaining to power) is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities. In the mundane, day-to-day, small-scale exchange of things in ordinary life, this fact is not visible, for exchange has the routine and conventionalized look of all customary behaviour. But these many ordinary dealings would not be possible were it not for a broad set of agreements concerning what is desirable, what a reasonable "exchange of sacrifices" compromises, and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances. What is political about this is not just the fact that it signifies and constitutes relations of privilege and social control. What is political about it is the constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension itself has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same *interests* in any specific regime of value, nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical.

On a more concrete level, Gavin Smith (1989: 24) argues that the production of enterprises depends on both the economic relations of production and the political relations necessary to protect — and, we may add, if necessary, transform — these relations. As in the case of the Huasicanchas in Peru, men and women do mobilize around issues that have to do with these relations.

The focus on agricultural production tends to neglect the importance of non-agricultural activities that often contribute an essential portion to the total income of household members and the unit as a whole. In her work on Guatemala, Carol Smith (1989) convincingly made this point. She observes that due to the diversification of income resources among rural small-holders in some areas, the concept of peasant, based in the first place on access to and working of a parcel of land, becomes problematic. The same author (Carol Smith 1986) also presents a related critique, which concerns the absence in many studies of a detailed analysis of how market forces actually operate. In most cases, both neo-classical and (neo)Marxist writers take the market as an external mechanism or system ("the invisible hand") without looking at how concrete relations and chains of exchange, open or disguised forms of coercion, and concealed or transparent ways of appropriation are

constituted by social ties, cultural values, and power struggles (see also, Booth 1985: 771). Perhaps these critical remarks explain why the commoditiza-tion debate so far has not seriously tackled the question of the emergence in many countries of a massive number of small-scale, non-agricultural enterprises mostly, but not solely, in urban settings. This is certainly so in the Nicaraguan case as we will see in more detail in Part II.

It is upon this critique that I build the following discussion of commoditization in the urban setting, an issue of major importance in our study.

Commoditization: the urban context

The appearance, highly diversified composition, and type of operation of these enterprises and their influence on the functioning of commodity and factor markets raise many thorny questions. From the 1970s, these issues have primarily been discussed within the informal-sector literature.[16] However, a critical overview of studies of the informal sector shows that most of the analytical frameworks used do not overcome the problem of a functionalistic dualism or polarism. As such, they are the twin expressions of the theories on the dual economy and the articulation of modes of production debate. A recurring element in these frameworks concerns the "necessity" argument: informal producers or small commodity producers are seen as necessary for capitalism, insofar as their labour, goods, and/or services are made available at lower costs than their so-called "real" value (Brass 1986: 56; Laenen 1988: 42-44). The most eloquently formulated critique against this "necessity" argument is made by Booth (1985: 771), who states that this reasoning is logically insufficient because the mechanisms of exploitation are asserted to exist and, therefore, do not need explanation. Moreover, Booth observes, it is based on theoretical arbitrariness because concrete exchanges are judged against an ideal type of "real" capitalism. Like the critique I developed concerning the agrarian context, we can say that these models are informed by a-historic, deterministic, and functionalistic thinking.

Aware of these criticisms, recent studies of female traders and the influence of gender on commerce give a new impetus to fieldwork and theory. An example in the petty commodity production debate is a study by Babb (1989) of the market women of Huarez, a city in the Peruvian central highlands. She focuses on how market women organize family, work, social, and political relations while dealing with the economic crisis that hit Peru in the 1970s. She pays special attention to the impact of a campaign against petty traders executed by subsequent governments and local authorities who portrayed marketers as "social parasites" responsible for high food prices. In this sense, her study is an interesting example to use for comparison with our case concerning the impact of the price-control commission created in Bluefields in April 1991 (Chapter 4). I have some criticism, however, of her theoretical framework.

Placing her study within the Marxist debate about domestic and petty commodity production, she argues that the work these women do has to be conceptualized as productive and, therefore, as contributing to the accumulation of capital —

accumulation based on unequal terms of trade in the marketplace and extracted by the urban industrial sector. Concerning her views on the domestic work that the market women also do, she contends that, although marketing shares some characteristics with domestic work and both have productive functions in capitalism, they belong to different modes of production (she rejects the idea proposed by Jelin (1980) that marketing is nothing more than "commercialized housework"). Given this, the exploitation of women stems from dominant class interests and sexual oppression. Notwithstanding this useful critique, the synthesis Babb then provides seems to me without much internal logic. She jumps from one level of analysis to another, mixing the concepts of modes of production, classes (dominant, middle), and sectors (industrial, poor). In the end, it becomes unclear whether all market women belong to the same class, mode of production, or sector and what the interrelations between these concepts are.

As another example of a contribution to the formal-informal sector debate, once again related to the Latin American context, I mention the debated but interesting work on Peru's capital Lima by de Soto (1990). This author and his research team combine an interest in informality with a study of the functioning of the legal system. According to de Soto, the crucial aspect of the informal sector is that it does not have access to effective legal institutions.[17] As a result, the people involved in informal activities, such as housing, transport, and trade, have created their own forms of organization and rules. In fact, the formal legal institutions actively discriminate against the sector to protect certain privileges of dominant groups. Thus, people are not (in)formal, but their actions and activities are (de Soto 1990: 12).

However, many of these initiatives are drawn into a kind of exceptional legal system created by the same institutions. This system results from the pressure that people exercise to obtain access to the resources of the state, despite open discrimination. Hence, some of the actions and activities of men and women involved in the informal sector are formalized. De Soto describes the space in which this takes place as a "grey area." This insight throws light upon the entangling of economic and political relations in everyday life. It is through ongoing interactions and negotiations that people manage to get general administrative or political rules applied selectively, or obtain authorization of activities that are formally not allowed or that require other procedures to get permission. This, I believe, is the strength of de Soto's argument and of direct relevance for our study of the world of trade in Bluefields and the ways politics inform commercial practices.

De Soto's conclusion is that Peruvian society is divided into two parts, vertically grounded on access to the state instead of horizontally based on class differentiation. Although de Soto's study points out the importance of the complex political dimension of trade, his approach has the same shortcoming as most dualistic frameworks. The basic conceptualization of the underlying logic of these points of view is aptly illustrated by Moser's (1978) article entitled "Informal sector *or* petty commodity production: dualism *or* dependence in urban development?" (my emphasis added). Although they provide a useful critique on (neo)liberal economics that overemphasize exchange relations and the central role of supposed free-market

forces, they are in one way or another caught in the web of diametrical opposites and the problems this causes for defining the main concepts, explaining the mechanisms of exploitation and subordination, and the heterogeneity of cases. Booth (1985: 772), discussing the informal sector studies, concludes that there is a widespread tendency in the relevant literature to reproduce "the same essential combination of vulgar value theory and functionalism in superficially novel conceptual languages."

How can we avoid this trap? I think we should pay more attention to the different features of entrepreneurship, stressing the need to look at the ways in which individuals build social relations and networks that enable them to develop their businesses, and how these networks, once established, can become a constraint as well as a positive influence on future decisions and advancement in careers. These insights have been provided by authors such as Long (1979) and van Donge (1991). They underscore the importance of patterns of socioeconomic differentiation as a result of the ways in which people make careers and develop their networks. At the same time, these authors argue that the explanation for progress or success cannot be reduced to what is seen as rational economic behaviour. An understanding of trade also requires an analysis of investments people make in social relations, and of the skills, values, norms, and luck that can influence decision-making processes, a point that I have made before.

In another article, Long (1986: 78-99) emphasizes that an analysis of differentiation should identify, on one hand, contrasting patterns of internal work organization, access to vital resources, and processes of exploitation and dependency. On the other hand, it should look at the forms and degrees of market integration of enterprises and how its operations modify the dominant capitalist economy. Based on a study of enterprises in the Mantaro region of Peru, he distinguishes between two main contrasting social configurations in terms of internal and external organizational patterns. The "coordinate" model is constituted on a balanced set of exchanges between the people or groups who control one or more of the crucial means of production. Internal relations are, therefore, essentially symmetrical although they might be unstable. In most cases, small-scale transporters, market traders, and street vendors who do business in a very competitive market, are characterized by this pattern. The second model is the "centralized" one in which a powerful individual or group controls decision-making processes to a high degree, due to access to strategic material and personnel and/or the attribution of authority by the other members of the enterprise. Artisan, mechanical, carpentry, and textile workshops and timber mills are examples of enterprises organized according to this pattern.

We must be careful, however, not to exaggerate the systemic nature of the activities of traders, whether they run a coordinate or centralized kind of enterprise (and this counts also for farming enterprises). As Gavin Smith (1989: 126) illustrates with a case study of a household that migrated from Huancayo to Lima, where its members are involved in the strawberry business and a number of additional economic activities:

> If there is anything of regularity it is a propensity to act quickly in response to opportunities and the absence of any huge bounty deriving from them. Despite the continual manipulation of trading capital and the number of activities that are undertaken, the insubstantial and spasmodic nature of the income thus generated mitigates against its being systematically accumulated.

One final key aspect is often overlooked, for example, in the studies on trade and informality in Nicaragua: the role of ethnicity. In Nicaragua, the disregard of this feature demonstrates the bias toward the Pacific region and mestizo population by social scientists (and politicians). However, an analysis of commerce in Bluefields should incorporate some comprehension of the role of ethnicity.[18]

Various authors have focused on the relation between ethnicity and commerce. For example, Carol Smith (1976) argued, using Guatemala as a case, that different levels of market control often coincide with differences in ethnicity in combination with class. Similar arguments were developed by Eades (1990) in a study of the Yoruba in northern Ghana. This author also remarks that once a particular ethnic group has established itself in a market niche, ethnic ties are used to suppress competition from outsiders. This pattern might be of relevance for Bluefields, although here we are dealing with more than two ethnic groups.

Among Marxists, many authors view ethnicity as a manifestation of ideology. As such, they analyze it in terms of "false" consciousness (see for a discussion, Solares 1983; Gurdian 1987: 171-189). This line of argument was adopted by the FSLN leaders during the first years after the revolution to legitimize their policy toward the Atlantic region. This interpretation has been criticized by various authors who claim that ethnicity is not just the dress of class relations and that there is no automatic relation between the two (Norton 1984: 426-434; Gray 1987: 190-193). Mobilization on the basis of ethnic affinity may cut through class differences and become a force on its own. Its complex character should, therefore, be subject to analysis, especially as it is manifested at a local level.

Bluefields and its hinterland

Hurricane Joan passed right over the town of Bluefields and, heading almost due westward, it stormed over the heart of the area I have called the hinterland. The geographic zone in which Joan had a major impact overlapped, to a large extent, a unit defined by historical and socioeconomic factors and geography.[19] In this concluding section, I give a brief description of these factors to introduce the place and people of our study who have made this land their home.

Geographically and historically, Nicaragua has been divided into two regions: the Pacific and the Atlantic Coast. The latter covers 66,542 km^2 or 56% of the country. Although populated by six different ethnic groups (mestizos, miskitos, creoles, sumus, garifonas, and ramas), who give the region one of its most outstanding characteristics, its inhabitants make up fewer than 10% of Nicaragua's total population (exact data are not available).

Ecologically, the coast is also different from the rest of Nicaragua. The Northern Autonomous Atlantic Region (formerly named Zelaya Norte and Special Zone I) is dominated by a tropical savanna forest of pines, predominantly *Pinus caribaea*. In the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region (Zelaya Sur and Special Zone II), a wet tropical rainforest predominates. Both regions are intersected with numerous rivers, creeks, and lagoons, which are replenished during an extremely vigorous wet season lasting nine months. Indeed, although I was accustomed to Dutch rainy weather, we can easily agree with Rushdie (1987: 122-123) who during his trip to what he called "the other side" (of the country) observed: "To live in Bluefields was to accept remoteness, just as it was also to accept rain. It was one of the wettest places I had ever been in." Climate, geography, and ecology have contributed to the inaccessibility of the coast, one of the other traits by which Rushdie was struck.

Differing colonial history marks another major contrast between the west and east. Whereas the Pacific region was colonized by the Spanish, the Atlantic Coast became part of the British colonies; between 1880 and 1930 it was practically in hands of capitalist entrepreneurs from the United States. This has led to a different kind of uneven capitalist development in which a series of intensive boom-and-bust cycles and long periods of economic crisis set the tone. With these changes came also distinctive religious and cultural influences, strongly coloured by protestant denominations among which the Moravian church has played the most crucial role (Vilas 1990b).

The hinterland is an area of dispersed homesteads and a few recently established *asentamientos* or small settlements build by the former Sandinist government to relocate rural people whose lives were in danger because of the continuous attacks by the Contras. As such, it is the only zone in the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region that does not have a zonal economic and administrative centre of its own; this function is fulfilled by Bluefields, which is the regional capital and the largest town on the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA 1989).

To the north, the hinterland is bordered by the farmlands of the people living along the Escondido and Kama rivers; to the west, by the Mahogany River; to the south, by the Punta Gorda River; and, to the east, by the natural border of the Bluefields Bay. As new settlers arrive and others leave, the borders of the area are constantly changing, hence the importance of a definition not solely based on strict geographic criteria. The zone is part of the wet or humid tropical rainforest of the Atlantic Coast, one of the few remaining extensions of this type of forest in Central America. With the exception of a few hills west of Bluefields, the zone is a lowland area characterized by dense rainforest, strips of swamps and mangroves with their respective typical vegetation patterns, and deforested parcels used for agriculture and livestock.[20] Soils in general have low fertility due to high levels of acidity and aluminium exacerbated by deficient drainage.

No roads connect places inside the zone with each other or with villages or towns outside the zone. To travel to Bluefields, hinterland farmers use various kinds of canoes or, in some cases, small speed-boats. People living close to the town walk. Most of the richer farmers possess a horse or mule. To travel to the Pacific and

interior departments of the country, most people take an express boat that connects Bluefields via the Escondido River with Rama where connecting roads to the west begin. A direct trip to the country's capital of Managua can be made by plane. However, apart from the relatively high cost of tickets which make this alternative only accessible to a small elite, one is never sure when and how to fly as travel dates and times are constantly changed, weather conditions are often poor, and planes are unavailable or plagued by technical problems. These geographic and infrastructural factors contribute much to the isolation of the zone, especially of its rural part.

Presently, the population of the hinterland amounts to about 6000 people on over 1000 farms. Most are of mestizo origin, with a few creole families along some of the creeks and rivers. Over the last hundred years, the number of creole farmers has gradually decreased making room for mestizos who have come to the Atlantic Coast from the western and interior regions of Nicaragua. This migration began at the end of the 19th century when foreign rubber, banana, and lumber companies attracted both workers and farmers. During the 1950s migration increased when the rapid expansion and modernization of export agriculture in the Pacific forced thousands of small producers to look for new lands. Recently, due to the Contra war, migrations have most often taken place within the Atlantic region. Farmers from zones, such as El Tortuguero, Punta Gorda, and La Cruz de Rio Grande, the battleground of Contra troops for almost a decade, have fled to the areas around Bluefields. Only since 1991, have some of these displaced families returned to their zones of origin. Others have decided to stay.

Bluefields, according to leading coastal historians, was founded in 1602 by a Dutch pirate (sic) named Blauveldt or Bleeveldt (in English, Bluefields). It is a multi-ethnic town with a Caribbean character, rather densely populated by about 32,000 people (1992 data based on Barett 1990). Although outnumbered by mestizos who make up 70% of the inhabitants, it is the home town of the largest group of creoles on the coast. Of a regional total estimated at 30,000, almost 9000 live in Bluefields. Ever since their arrival in the region during the late 16th century, creoles have played an important role in coastal society. From its foundation on, during the time of English domination and during and after the mainly US-directed enclave period, the town has served as an important harbour and dynamic commercial centre. Today, trade and transport are two of the main economic sectors.

From 1844 until 1894, Bluefields was also the capital of Mosquitia, the protectorate ruled by Miskito kings under a regional variant of English indirect rule (CIDCA 1989). When in 1894, the Mosquitia was incorporated into the nation-state, the town became the region's main and growing political-administrative, educational, and service centre. It continues to exercise these functions, which provide the other available jobs in town. Notwithstanding these occupations and despite vibrant commercial activity, life in town is increasingly hard, poverty is widespread, and unemployment is a serious problem. Once again Rushdie (1987: 125) was right: "Bluefields was poor as mud. (Only dry places could be dirt poor.)" Although in the four years after the hurricane the town has been more or less completely rebuilt — a considerable achievement! — the difficult economic

situation faced by Nicaragua and the coast makes perspectives for further improvements very dark. Despite this sombre panorama, let us accept the invitation of *Dimensión Costeña* to visit Bluefields:

Ven, yo te invito a Bluefields,
tierra donde yo nací.
Un lugar de sueños y riquezas,
donde el mar te acaricias sin fin.
Ven aquí, por favor, a Bluefields,
el amor de mi tierra ofrezco a ti.
Bello y hermoso Bluefields,
hoy he llorado por ti...
Pero sé que una mañana no lejana,
seras la flor mas bella del jardín.
Please come back to Bluefields and me.[21]

Notes

1. From the music cassette "Mama let me go" (ENIGRAC 1989).

2. For a very readable volume on theories of culture and reciprocal relations with social structure, see Alexander and Seidman (1990).

3. See the research proposals: "Regional autonomy and local-level development: the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua" (Long and Vernooy 1988) and "Autonomía y desarrollo local: la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua" (Vernooy 1988).

4. See especially "Considerations VII and VIII" of the Autonomy Law in which these rights are formulated. For a discussion of the ideas and principles behind the law, see: Gurdian (1987: 171-190), who, apart from being CIDCA's general director from 1981 until 1990, was one of the members of the National Autonomy Commission. This commission was inaugurated on 5 December 1984 with the special mandate to elaborate an autonomy statute.

5. After carrying out an evaluation study for the Swedish International Development Agency (SAREC) of CIDCA's first six years of work, Norman Long received an invitation from the research and documentation centre to participate in its future research activities.

6. An additional important element of the research project concerned the participation of young coastal researchers with "the aim to acquire more experience in the field of research and to introduce new research techniques and analytical elements for the study of the coastal reality" (words of former CIDCA's director Galio Gurdian). This was an additional task to which I have dedicated myself during the three years of fieldwork. Regular organized workshops (one or two days) and seminars (one or two weeks with the participation of the directors and other researchers from CIDCA, and Norman Long) in which research findings and experiences were discussed and related to theory and methodology formed the most important means of realizing this goal. These encounters were very stimulating and provided us the energy to keep the project going, explore new horizons, and try to improve our work.

7. In this thesis, I build upon a collection of articles that make up a first volume of research findings (Vernooy *et al.* 1991a) and on several additional articles published by CIDCA or to be published in scientific journals (Vernooy *et al.* 1991b; Torres and Vernooy 1992a, 1992b).

8. In Chapter 3, I discuss in more detail the selection and use of these cases. For a discussion of this research technique, see: Mitchell (1983), Yin (1989), and Hammersley (1992: chapters 10 and 11).

9. From January 1989 to November 1991, I edited a volume of these articles related to socioeconomic and political issues, to be published by CIDCA. Presently, we are looking for the financial resources to go ahead with this project, which we consider of interest for anyone who wants to know more about the history of the Atlantic Coast.

10. See Marcus and Fischer (1986: 57-59) for a more detailed discussion of these uses of life histories. In Chapter 6, I turn to the problems inherent in this technique.

11. Through fieldwork carried out during 1985-1986 in the department of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, our contribution to this debate concerned the question of how rural families actively reshaped the course of the Sandinist agrarian reform policy (van Gerwen and Vernooy 1987: 128-142; Vernooy 1987).

12. We must be careful not to depict people, whether they are professional policymakers or not, as *Homo planicus*, driven only by the logic of planning. For a similar argument, see: von Oppen (1990), in a rejoinder to van Dusseldorp (1990).

13. Thanks to a visit by Henry Bernstein to the Agricultural University of Wageningen in 1986, theoretical and empirical questions surrounding commoditization regained new life (Bernstein 1985). The same year, similar issues were debated at the 13th European congress for rural sociology in Braga, Portugal (Bernstein 1986). Building on these discussions, Norman Long, Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, Chris Curtin, and Louk Box published a collection of articles entitled *The commoditization debate: labour process, strategy and social network* (Long *et al.* 1986). This volume will serve as a starting point for what follows.

14. He develops these arguments as a critique on Reinhardt's book entitled *The peasant question and family farming in the Colombian Andes* (1988), in which she uses what Brass calls an "essentialist and neo-populist approach" (hence, we may classify it as a Chayanovian model) to conceptualize the peasantry under study as a uniform group of commodity producers.

15. See, for example, writers such as Vilas (1987) and Vargas (1991) inspired by (neo)Marxist theories. The latter, in discussing seven factors that made the Sandinist revolution possible, states the following (my translation):

> The differentiation between the social classes in the Nicaraguan society and in Central America in general is a very slow process. The pre-capitalist relations continue to have a very heavy weight. The penetration of capitalism in the countryside and the relative development of urban industrialism during the last decades transform these relations, but do not uproot nor eliminate them. Modern political and cultural life is not only suffocated by the dictatorship, but also by the network of these traditional social relations (Vargas 1991: 19).

To stress his negative esteem of pre-capitalist relations, Vargas describes this feature as the "internal weakness of the Nicaraguan civil society" on which the Somocist state was built.

16. See, for example: Bromley (1978); Laenen (1988) for a critical overview; Menjivar Larin and Perez Sainz (1989); and Portes *et al.* (1989).

17. This approach resembles ideas and definitions of the informal economy developed by Portes and Castells (1989: 11-37). They see the informal economy as "a process of income-generation characterized by one central feature: *it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated.*" On page 13, the authors define this institutional regulation as "the explicit, active intervention of the state in the process and outcome of income-generating activities, on the basis of a set of enforceable legal rules." The problem with these views is that they tend to introduce a new and very formalistic dualism, this time not in a strict economic, but in a political sense. To be able to stick to the opposition formal-informal economy, the authors reify the concept of the state and place it outside society. Forms of regulation and their social meaning should be subject to research instead of preconceptions (Gavin Smith 1992).

18. I will not enter a detailed discussion of the complex question of ethnicity. It suffices to observe that, as with so many other theoretical issues, different and often opposing theoretical approaches to ethnicity can be distinguished. One example of these diametrical positions indicates the complexity of the question. The example concerns the distinction

between "instrumentalist" and "primordial" models. The former holds that political and economic changes disrupt traditional social orders and create new constellations of shared interests. Ethnic ties only retain their emotional power so long as they advance these shared interests. Hence, they are "instrumental" for the maintenance of particular socioeconomic systems. The latter states that changing social situations disrupt conventional ways of understanding and acting. People affected by disruption seek refuge precisely in those aspects that most fundamentally ("primordially") define for them who they are. Ethnic identity and ties often provide one such refuge (Bentley 1987: 24-55; see also, de Vos 1982: 5-41).

Bentley proposes a way out of these dualistic approaches. Making use of Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice, he considers ethnic affinity as being founded upon common life experiences. These shared experienced generate similar practices and representations informed by a certain regularity without, however, being directly related to rules. As an example the author mentions common memories and a similar rhythm of living and working. It is important though to observe that ethnic groups are usually internally differentiated in terms of power and domination — differences that can lead to contrasting reactions to economic and political change.

19. Before the hurricane hit the Atlantic Coast, we intended to start with a pilot project in the close surroundings of Bluefields (the area between Mahogany River in the west, Kukra River in the south, and Caño Negro in the north). The boundaries of this zone were defined according to the past and planned future extraction activities of the region's principal lumber company (COMABLUSA), owned by the regional government, on national lands (state patrimony) and on lands owned by private farmers. The research goals were to document and analyze actual and past production and extraction practices of the company and farmers living in the zone and to contribute, in close cooperation with both parties, to a future forest management plan including reforestation. This research would be carried out together with the regional offices of the Ministry of Agrarian Development and Land Reform (MIDINRA), the Nicaraguan Institute of Natural Resources and Environment (IRENA), and the National Farmer Union (UNAG), under the supervision of CIDCA-Bluefields (CIDCA-Bluefields 1988). However, due to the hurricane and the emerging priorities, together with financial problems and disagreements among the institutions, this pilot project was cancelled at the end of 1988.

20. Typical tree species are: *Pterocarpus officinalis*, *Calophyllum brasiliense*, *Vochysia hondurense*, *Symphonia globulifera*, and *Dipteryx panamensis* or Almendro, a tree used for the production of charcoal (Vandermeer 1991).

21. Come, I invite you to Bluefields,
land where I was born.
A place of dreams and richness,
where the seas endlessly caresses you.
Please come here, to Bluefields,
the love of my land I am offering to you.
Beautiful, beautiful Bluefields,
today I have cried for you.
But I know that a morning that will soon come,
you will be the most beautiful flower of the garden.

PART I
MAKING A LIVING IN THE HINTERLAND

2. "STARTING ALL OVER AGAIN": HURRICANE JOAN AND RESPONSES TO THE RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAM

> Damned country! Once again on the ground! How many times do we have to repeat the same things? How many times do we have to build it up? The exclamation of the soul is almost inevitable. The panorama of mud and desolation provokes a strange mix of pain, fury, impotence and futility.
> Sofia Montenegro, "The country of Sisyphus"
> (*La Barricada*, 29 October 1988)

Struggling against wind and water

On 21 and 22 October 1988, five weeks after my arrival in Bluefields, Nicaragua was hit by a hurricane. Joan, as it was named, started its destructive course on the southern Atlantic Coast with Bluefields and its hinterland as one of the targets.[1] Most of the town was blown away. Large parts of the tropical rainforest were severely damaged. Fields were destroyed and thousands of domestic animals were killed. Coming out of our temporary shelters after the raging winds had calmed down, it was indeed mud and desolation we were confronted with.

The threat of the hurricane motivated the (then) Sandinist government to create several emergency committees at national and regional levels. These committees were established as temporary councils in charge of managing the pre- and, eventually, post-hurricane situation. They were formed by leaders of government institutions, the FSLN party, the Red Cross, Protestant and Catholic churches, and nongovernmental organizations. Before the arrival of Joan, the committee in the Bluefields region effectively organized the evacuation of thousands of people to towns and cities in the Pacific and interior regions of the country. Moreover, it coordinated the evacuation of thousands of others to twelve temporary refugee centres in Bluefields. With the help of employees of the municipality and the regional Ministry of Health, it stored food and medicines in preparation for the worst. In the weeks after Joan, the Bluefields committee elaborated a special plan for the reconstruction and reactivation of the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region. This plan aimed to cover all the zones, communities, and economic sectors affected by the hurricane.

Although in the scarce literature about recent events on the Atlantic Coast and about the hurricane in particular (ENVIO, April 1989; Sollis 1990) some reference is made to Joan, no detailed analysis is provided of the post-hurricane process and the social meaning and consequences of the reconstruction program. In this chapter, I attempt such an analysis. I use the coming and going of Joan as a case study to highlight the variety of ways in which coastal people deal with social discontinuities

in their attempts to make a living. As the image of Sisyphus so aptly illustrates, dealing with social disruption is a recurring phenomenon in coastal and Nicaraguan history. However, it is important to consider these disruptions, not merely as isolated elements, but as constitutive parts of the different life stories and experiences of people. Through an analysis of the ways in which men and women were affected by the hurricane and how they dealt with it, we can obtain insight into the spectrum of coastal livelihood practices and problems. Thus I will try to describe how individuals as part of a certain social unit or units came to terms with the need to make a living under post-hurricane circumstances. This includes an understanding of how people managed to get access to scarce "emergency" resources provided by the state and other organizations and whether this relates to their ability to impose their definition of the situation on others?

Our interest is to analyze how the reconstruction plan was carried out in practice, focusing on the hinterland of Bluefields and its dispersed rural population as one of the most affected groups. I will consider the objectives of the plan and the ways in which they were interpreted by the different organizations involved in its execution; the ways in which concrete actions were undertaken by their representatives; and the foreseen and unforeseen results of these actions. The period covered is from 22 October 1988 to the end of April 1989, including three months of rainy season (November to January) and three months of dry season (February to April).

In this chapter, I give a brief overview of the hurricane and its disastrous consequences, followed by an account of the reconstruction program and its significance for the Bluefields hinterland and its population. This program included, among other things, an extensive food program and a portable sawmill project. In March 1989, prohibition of burning became part of the program with important consequences. I pay special attention to a series of encounters in which the impact of the hurricane and the alternatives for starting all over again were discussed. In the final section, I summarize the main findings of the first stage of our fieldwork.

Unchained fury: the coming and going of Joan

Joan crossed Nicaragua from east coast to west in a more-or-less straight line from Bluefields to Managua covering about 320 km. She raged over an area of about 48,000 km^2. Almost 200,000 people were seriously affected by the natural disaster, among them more than 200 wounded, 110 missing, and 121 who lost their lives. In total, 325,000 people were evacuated to safer places. Material losses were enormous, including partial damage or complete destruction of houses, farms, hospitals, health and child care centres, schools, roads, bridges, electrical cables and supply stations, and fishing and lumber companies. Thousands of hectares of crops (rice, corn, millet, plantain, bananas, vegetables, fruit, and cacao) were carried away by wind and water. Nicaragua's main export crop, coffee, was seriously damaged. Agriculture in general was one of the principal victims, as Joan arrived at the end of the first harvest when many farmers had just begun the second sowing cycle.

Thousands of hectares of pasture land were inundated, causing the death of large numbers of domestic animals.[2]

This dismal account of damages would not be complete without a description of the effect of the hurricane on the tropical rainforest of the Atlantic Coast. Trees over an area of about 6000 km^2 were razed causing capital losses of precious lumber and a major long-term impact on the ecology of the rainforest. When, in the weeks after the disaster, I had a chance to enter the affected forest (or what was left of it), I could hardly believe my eyes. We observed a desolate panorama of uprooted, broken, and badly damaged trees, most of them without leaves. From the air, the scene resembled an overturned box of matches or the beginning of a game of Mikado. In a report to the United Nations presented at the end of November 1988, the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) estimated that the cost of damage caused by the hurricane mounted to US$840 million! (To put that figure in perspective, the country's exports for the same year were US$295 million.)

Bluefields and its hinterland were harassed for twelve long hours by Joan's destructive forces, which we will remember for a life time. However, initially many people in Bluefields did not want to believe that a hurricane was coming toward the town. This disbelief was reinforced by news that we received from Costa Rican television and radio stations. For several days it was announced that the hurricane's path would go in the direction of Puerto Limon, the main harbour town on the neighbour country's Atlantic Coast. It was only in the very early morning of 20 October that most doubts were scattered when the ad hoc regional emergency committee started to evacuate hundreds of young children, old people, and (pregnant) women from Corn Island, El Bluff, and Bluefields to El Rama, Boaco, and Managua. The same day, about 600 inhabitants of the island of Rama Cay were evacuated to the San José primary school in Bluefields.

Afterward, we found out that apart from those who had doubts, there were also people who did not know that a hurricane was coming toward the Atlantic Coast! Among these were Griselda and two of her children, who happened to be on their farm in Caño Blanco, while Griselda's husband Elmer and their third child were at home in Bluefields. When Elmer heard about the hurricane, he tried to reach Griselda. However, recognizing the danger of going out by *cayuco* on the Bay of Bluefields, he decided not to take the risk. On the evening of the 21st, Griselda and her daughters stayed in the farmhouse until it became clear that the winds would blow them all away. She and her children left the shaking house in the middle of the stormy night to attach themselves to a tree in the middle of the yard. There they found themselves encircled and protected by their cows, who had found their own way to resist the powerful forces of nature. Only three days later, they were able to join Elmer and Elmercito, their youngest child.[3]

A desolate farmer from Musilayna Creek, observing that his family had lost almost everything, summarized the situation, "We have to start all over again..."

To face the situation at the national level the government declared a state of emergency on 20 October for a period of 30 days. Former president Daniel Ortega organized a temporary emergency cabinet that initiated a request to the international community for aid in the case of an emergency. The national emergency

committee, created in 1982 to deal with the flooding in many parts of the country caused by the tropical storm, Aletta, was reconvened. National and international institutions and organizations participated in this committee, among them the Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social y Bienestar (INSSBI), the Ministry of Health, the labour unions (Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (CST) and Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC)), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Red Cross, the Comité Evangélico pro Ayuda y Desarrollo (CEPAD), OXFAM, and CARE. In every department, regional committees were formed to organize "all tasks necessary to protect the lives of the population" as their official mandate stated.

Hence, even before Joan hit the Atlantic Coast, the government had organized a hierarchical framework through which actions were coordinated. The setting up of this emergency framework, as we may call it, and the selection of people to be in charge of specific tasks were made possible because of the existing extensive state organizational structures stretching from the capital to towns and villages. The fact that the Nicaraguans had experienced eight years of Contra war, which forced them to be prepared for catastrophes and quick action, certainly influenced this mobilization of the emergency framework. It was generally recognized that this was one of the main reasons why only a relatively small number of people lost their lives despite the magnitude of material damages.

Mud and desolation in the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region

Besides the loss of 26 lives and 456 people wounded (not including those in a state of shock), material damages caused by Joan in the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region were many. Bluefields and its hinterland were among the areas most affected by the hurricane. According to an inventory made by the regional emergency committee, 9353 houses, 52 schools, 9 health centres, 20 storehouses, 37 churches, 10 industrial enterprises, harbour and transport facilities, and the electrical system of Bluefields suffered severe damages. Twelve boats sank, three ran aground, and four were otherwise damaged. Another problem was the tremendous amount of rubbish — zinc, boards, plywood, bricks, fences, wires, and branches mingled with a variety of personal belongings — piled in the streets of the town. The situation, moreover, was a clear threat to the health of the residents, feeding ground for an outbreak of epidemics. Considerable amounts of rice, corn, roots and tubers, plantains and bananas, sugarcane, and coconuts were lost and the plantation of African palm oil in Kukra Hill was partially hit (*Sunrise*, February 1989: 10-11).

While the *Blufileños* in general were badly affected by the hurricane, the population in the hinterland found itself in worse conditions. As a *campesino* from Musilayna Creek stated:

> Here, we are ruined. We lost everything: cassava, quequisque, rice, coconuts, our lime trees. We had packed our clothes and small belongings

> in plastic bags, but they were blown away in all directions! We only managed to find back a part of them.

He told us that, before Joan, they were living in poverty, but now they had to start again from the very beginning — an expression we would hear many times during those days. From 22 October on, cleaning and reconstruction activities were initiated at full speed in Bluefields with the help of the emergency committee, institutions, the FSLN party, and small groups of volunteers organized in each neighbourhood. During the first weeks after the disaster, the families in the hinterland, however, were left to their own fate.

Among these families, in November amounting to 746 or 4421 people (according to a census taken by the Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG), some were more affected than others. Most lost their homes and crops, some also lost their cattle, others lost everything including tools and personal belongings. Among the latter were the dispersed households located along the Escondido, Kukra, and Mahogany rivers who suffered from inundations of their farms. Most of them lived far from Bluefields, which from the very first moment after the hurricane made it more difficult to get access to crucial aid and resources.

The extent of the damage to the tropical rainforest in the hinterland, habitat of the rural population, explains the critical conditions in which families found themselves. The short- and long-term consequences of the disturbance to the complex ecological systems found in the different zones of the rainforest were unpredictable making **all** productive practices (agriculture, animal breeding, hunting, fishing, forestry) even more uncertain than they already were.

Fallen trees obstructed creeks, the "roads" of the region and for many farmers the only way to reach Bluefields. Broken branches and split trunks of trees blocked the hundreds of paths that farmers used to visit each other, reach the creeks and rivers, and travel to Bluefields. The death or flight of thousands of *animales del monte* (wild animals) also represented a loss to farmers. The direct forces of rain and wind in combination with the erosion of thousands of tonnes of soil had a tumultuous effect on the populations of crustaceans and fish in the numerous creeks and rivers and the Bay of Bluefields, important additional sources of protein for the rural population. The absence of shade provided by the foliage of trees threatened the lives of surviving domestic animals. Furthermore, many *campesinos* feared the onset of plagues, given the overall chaotic situation and the (temporary) absence of many predators.

The reconstruction program

Given the disastrous consequences of the hurricane, the regional emergency committee elaborated an ambitious "Plan of lines and actions for the reconstruction of the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region" presented on 23 November 1988. As this date indicates, efforts to return to normal life both within and outside the organizational context of the committee had by then been under way for a month.

Speaking on behalf of the regional government and directing its discourse with the central government, the committee presented three reconstruction priorities in its plan: continued implementation of the autonomy project; guaranteed provision and subsistence production of food for the population; and reconstruction and reactivation of the material and economic basis of the region (*Comité Regional de Emergencia* 1988: 1-3). More concrete goals were also outlined, including the political mobilization and popular participation of the population, the rational use and management of natural resources, and the training of human resources to put into practice regional policies (*Comité Regional de Emergencia* 1988: 8).

Hence, the committee on behalf of the regional government, made strategic use of the situation created by Joan to demand major support for the execution of the autonomy process. It considered reconstruction and reactivation, not merely as economic problems, but as political issues as well. I will return to this important observation later in this chapter when I discuss the demands of the farming population directed toward the committee and regional government.

The general objectives were followed by a list of specific actions to be developed by the productive sectors to reach the abovementioned goals, taking into account the main limitations in reaching them. Within this all-encompassing framework, the committee set out the working lines for the regional ministries, other governmental institutions, and nongovernmental organizations.

Starting all over again

Three weeks after Joan, on 13 November, the regional delegates of the national farmers' union, UNAG, managed to organize a first meeting with the assistance of about sixty producers from the Bluefields hinterland, the majority of them men. The meeting was held in response to *inquietudes* or worries expressed by farmers near the town during conversations with UNAG leaders. The aim of this meeting, presided over by Santos Escobar, a member of the regional directorate responsible for the Bluefields hinterland, was to discuss the situation and find solutions for the most urgent problems: the rebuilding of houses and farms, the distribution of donations, seeds for the pastures, nails, hammers, and other tools, the health problems of many children and women, the poor condition of domestic animals especially cows, the provision of loans for the *postrera*, and the payment of outstanding debts to the National Development Bank (BND). To clarify the last two problems, a *tecnico* of the regional bank office was invited to attend.

Although these problems were all briefly discussed, the main goal of the meeting turned out to be explaining to the producers the strategy that the UNAG would follow as the union's contribution to the reconstruction process along the lines formulated by the regional emergency committee. This included the unwelcome announcement that, in the distribution of zinc and food, the institutions and people of Bluefields would be the first beneficiaries.[4] Moreover, Santos explained that various neighbourhoods and the town would receive aid from organizations in other countries, pointing out that the hinterland could not count on such support. Having stated all this, Santos went on to explain the union's strategy:

> Our first preoccupation is the distribution of plastic [instead of zinc] to be able to stay on the farm. Second, to distribute food in which we have advanced a little bit by more or less organising the communities of Mahogany, Kama, Musilayna, Caño Negro, Santa Martha and San Antonio. And third, seeds, the other important thing. We have here corn seeds, but we do not know yet who is their owner. We do not know the price yet of the seeds, but the important thing is that we have them and that we can start to distribute them. Thus, we have advanced in two things. And what else do we think about? We are going to elaborate a regional housing project and ask the bank for money to buy zinc and some motorsaws so that we can start building houses. This is a personal idea of me. The other interest we have is the financing of the sowing of the *postrera*.

Here Santos turned over the meeting to the *tecnico* of the bank without giving his audience a chance to ask questions. The *tecnico* explained that the policy of the bank would be to finance 100% of the cost of sowing basic grains. Moreover, requests for loans to buy cattle would be discussed. Producers with outstanding debts were asked to visit the bank so each case could be dealt with separately and agreement could be reached. This announcement was the result of a policy approved on 4 November by the Central Bank for a "Special financial program for the reactivation of the production affected by Joan," following the instructions of President Daniel Ortega. It was foreseen that about 60,000 farming families would benefit from this program. However, the hinterland of Bluefields was not officially included in the list of regions that could make use of the financing; the designated zones were Kukra Hill, la Cruz and la Barra de Río Grande, Pearl Lagoon, Corn Island, and Orinoco (*Barricada* 5 November 1988 and 8 November 1988). Despite the formal rules, the Bluefields office of the National Development Bank decided to include the hinterland in the program.

Referring to Santos' idea of a housing project, the *tecnico* explained that the bank was willing to provide a loan for zinc, but only if the farmer would guarantee the lumber. He also indicated that this project should be organized and promoted through the UNAG and the producers themselves. When the audience finally had the opportunity to speak, they asked the *tecnico* about interest rates on old and new loans. They also enquired about the possibility of obtaining, through the UNAG, electric saws and other tools, such as machetes, and of giving priority to *campesinos* who had outstanding lumber-cutting contracts. Furthermore, they wanted to know if they could get seeds to reforest areas destroyed by Joan. The first set of questions was answered by the bank's employee with details of percentages and procedures. In response to the second set, Santos told them that the UNAG, via its cooperative enterprise ECODEPA, would do its best, but that the *productores* were not the only ones who had requested electric saws and tools. Concerning seeds, he promised to consult the Institute for Natural Resources and the Environment (IRENA).[5]

Not present at this meeting were representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reform (MIDINRA) and IRENA. Two days later, when I asked IRENA's director, George Brooks, for his comments on this omission, he answered, "They [the UNAG] did not invite us." After I had related the proceedings of the

meeting, he replied, "Right now the farmers think that they can extend their pastures into the forest, because all the trees fell down. But that is not true." He then explained me that IRENA, although it had lost its office and inventory in the hurricane, had already begun a series of evaluation trips to the Kukra, Kama, Caño Negro, and Mahogany rivers to assess damage to the various forest areas of the hinterland. IRENA estimated that about 2500 km^2 were seriously affected, but more precise data were required before plans could be made to extract the lumber on the ground.

I was unable to contact someone from MIDINRA about the meeting. However, in the following days I found out that the ministry's main occupation so far concerned an evaluation of the damages to the agro-industrial African palm oil project in Kukra Hill, the cacao project in La Cruz de Río Grande, and the coconut palm plantations in Corn Island, San Mariano, and other communities.

This gives us a first impression of the preoccupations and perceptions of some farmers and the people working for UNAG, IRENA, and MIDINRA. In a subsequent section, I provide further description and analysis of the roles of these actors in the process of returning to normal life. I will do this by focusing on several facets of the three specific plans that materialized in the weeks and months that followed. These plans concerned a food program, a decree on the prohibition of burning to prepare fields for sowing, and a portable sawmill project. However, first I will outline briefly the history of UNAG in the region of Bluefields as necessary background for understanding its role in the post-hurricane period and in rural development in general.

UNAG-Bluefields: 1981-1991

The UNAG in Bluefields came into being shortly after the union was established at the national level on 25 April 1981.[6] The organizational work in the region was done by a national leader of the Association of Rural Workers (ATC) who was sent to the coast to support the first cooperatives that had emerged shortly before and after the revolution in communities such as Punta Gorda, Kukra Hill, la Cruz de Río Grande, and Caño Negro. Leaders of these cooperatives became members of the first board of directors of UNAG-Bluefields and some of them continue to be regional delegates.

In 1981 and 1982, the union played an active role in the national literacy campaign and in various health campaigns in the region. In the following years, the regional Sandinist government assigned the union the task of forming cooperatives, strictly following national agrarian (reform) policy. However, little knowledge of the particular features of coastal society was shown, which, along with the cruel events of the Contra war, was to make it difficult for UNAG-Bluefields to accomplishing this goal.

At the time of the hurricane, the regional leaders wanted to achieve a broader set of goals that embraced not only strengthening the regional cooperatives (Kukra Hill and San Mariano), but also developing a livestock project and a cacao project, providing services for the production, storage, and commercialization of basic

grains, and integrating ex-Contras into agricultural production. Obtaining the political support of the farmers remained an important objective and, with the 1990 elections ahead, it gained even more importance.

Since 1985, the regional board of directors has been headed by part-time farmers, all men who over the years have become increasingly bureaucratized, and politicized, that is, oriented toward a political career. Second, it was not until 1989 that a special women's section was founded and headed by a woman (I return to this in Chapter III). Despite this initiative, the UNAG has remained very male-oriented. For the 1990 elections, Santos Escobar, a member of the board, became a candidate for the national assembly. The then-president was a candidate for the regional autonomous council. Both are important regional FSLN members. In the third place, the UNAG's board of directors and its delegates maintain close informal relations with the heads and *tecnicos* of regional institutions, like MIDINRA, the Ministry of Interior, and the bank. Relations with the director of IRENA have been controversial due to opposing views on the viability of agriculture in the region, especially in the hinterland of Bluefields. Fourth, the UNAG-Bluefields is basically an organization of and for mestizos, despite the multi-ethnic character of the farming population in the region (Tijerino and Vernooy 1991: 159-194). With these points in mind, I turn to the food program.

The food program or the politics of aid

Apart from organizing the reconstruction of government offices, public buildings, communication, transport and harbour facilities, and the electrical system in the town of Bluefields, one of the major tasks of the regional emergency committee concerned the provision and distribution of food. From the end of October until the end of December 1988, the population affected by Joan survived on donations. Each family, in Bluefields and in the rural area, received a quota of staples: beans, rice, flour, cooking oil, and (powdered) milk, occasionally supplemented with sugar, batteries, clothes, and canned fish and meat.

The donations were from countries all over the world in response to requests from both the central and regional governments and nongovernmental organizations and churches with counterparts abroad. Among the donor countries, Cuba managed to send the first planeloads of food and medical aid to Bluefields, even before the national airlink between the town and Managua was re-established. In sharp contrast with the aid policy of these countries was the attitude of the US government, which continued its aggressive anti-Nicaragua campaign by refusing to send any help whatsoever. Instead of offering aid, representatives of the US government in Washington and Managua accused the Sandinist government of exaggerating the amount of damage caused by Joan to obtain more international donations. These accusations were quickly published by anti-Sandinist radio stations and *La Prensa*, the newspaper under the control of the actual president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro.

Two weeks after the hurricane, on 8 November, George Bush was elected president of the USA. In his first speech after his electoral victory, he declared that

"to maintain help to the Contras is of high priority to keep pressure on the Sandinist government" (*La Barricada*, 10 November 1988). Two days later, president Reagan extended the country's economic boycott against Nicaragua, effective since 1985, arguing that the policy and the actions of the Sandinist government continued to be an extraordinary threat to the USA. One month earlier, the US Congress had approved a US$27 million "humanitarian aid" package to the same Contras, to replace the military aid that, because of the "Iran-Contra affair," had been stopped in February of the same year. Although the approval of this amount and the way in which it was justified indicated a shift in the US government's strategy toward Nicaragua, the election of George Bush promised little in terms of immediate improvement of relations between the countries.

Meanwhile, the Contras continued killing and destroying. In September, a group attacked the express boat between Rama and Bluefields causing two deaths and wounding ten. In October, Contras ambushed a bus close to the village of San Juan on the Coco River, killing nine people and wounding four others. In the week after the hurricane, 3000 Contras entered the northern part of the country from their camps in Honduras and began a series of attacks on coffee plantations.[7]

In addition to the threat of war, the country continued to face a severe economic crisis that had complex and intertwined roots characterized by internal monetary and fiscal distortions, leading in 1987 to a net deficit of 25.3% of the gross national product and an inflation rate of 1347.2%. External distortions played another role. In the same year, imports exceeded exports by US$571.4 million. Problems increased due to inadequate use of macroeconomic instruments, such as interest and exchange rates, and galloping inflation (ENVIO, May 1990: 30-31; Sevilla 1990: 10-13, 43-48). These factors were in one way or another influenced by the enormous costs and disruptions of the war, the US trade embargo, and the position of Nicaragua's small, open, and export-dependent economic system in the periphery of the international economy. This situation forced the Sandinist government to begin an economic adjustment program in February 1988.

The first step in this program consisted of monetary reform based on a massive devaluation of the cordoba, the unification of exchange rates, and an adjustment of relative prices. At the same time, the government reduced state investments, cut bank loans drastically and indexed interest rates (to follow inflation), and reorganized the state apparatus through a process of integration of departments and the elimination of 30,000 posts in two years. Salaries were adjusted accordingly. The second step, in June 1988, liberalized prices and non-public-sector salaries to give freer rein to "free market forces."

These so-called "orthodox" and pro-International Monetary Fund adjustment measures aimed to modify relative prices, reduce the fiscal deficit and public expenses, increase exports, and induce economic efficiency. As was admitted by Daniel Ortega and Luis Carrion, then minister of economic affairs, hard reality had forced the government to develop this policy (Leonhard 1989: 26-27; Zamora and García 1989: 6). To resolve some of the main problems, they had to review ideals and transition schemes and act once more on mere pragmatic grounds.

This brief account of the political and economic context reveals that the capacity of the country to deal with the post-hurricane situation was heavily constrained. This capacity was further weakened by the impact of Joan and the expenses incurred by the government in dealing with its effects. In November 1988, the government increased its expenses by 91.3% over October. In December, expenses increased by another 112.4% (Sevilla 1990: 55). These expenditures caused further devaluation.

Despite some problems of communication with Managua about obtaining materials and provisions, the distribution of food in Bluefields began during the last week of October. Thanks to a solid organization in which the sixteen neighbourhood emergency committees played a crucial role, it worked fairly well. I was able to observe this in practice in the Cotton Tree/Punta Fria neighbourhood where, for some time, I became involved in the distribution of food aid. Here, people lining up to receive their weekly quota of beans and sugar complained about a lack of coordination between institutions and orientation of the FSLN.

One day in November 1988, a woman accused the *barrio*'s sector responsible for the food distribution of behaving like *el presidente*, when she did not receive any clothes. The person responsible explained to her that there were not enough clothes and that the people who arrived first were the lucky ones. He then said with a smile to the people in line, "Nobody ever had it so good. You all receive sugar, rice, cooking oil, flour, beans, soap. So don't complain!" The woman murmured something, but then remained silent. At the end of the second week of November the situation improved considerably when trade between the Pacific region and Bluefields was restored. Market sellers were again offering vegetables, fruit, and meat.

The donations, once they reached the hinterland, turned out to be of great importance, because there the families were confronted with a series of adverse situations. They had lost most of their harvest. The sowing of the *postrera* with corn and beans in November and December was difficult because of the chaos created on the farm and the need first to rebuild their houses. It was also expected that the sowing of the first cycle in May 1989 would be difficult because of the loss of seeds and tools and because of the continuing chaotic situation. In short, subsistence production would probably not be realized for another six months, which meant that the survival of hundreds of families was in question.

This problem forced the regional government and the institutions involved in rural development to look for a specific solution. To deal with the problem, the regional government announced a special emergency plan for 840 families of the Bluefields hinterland. It was recognized that the rural population was more affected than the urban one (*La Barricada*, 26 November 1988). UNAG was assigned the role of distributing 9000 sheets of zinc, 5000 pairs of rubber boots, and corn and bean seeds to the families. MIDINRA's head office in Managua promised to send machetes, files, insecticides, and pesticides to the region as soon as possible. Moreover, the plan aimed to strengthen the regional offices of MIDINRA and the National Development Bank by providing more staff. In December, the UNAG managed to distribute the zinc, boots, and seeds. The other goods did not arrive. Concerning the additional human resources, one extra *tecnico* was sent to the bank

from the capital. She spent the month of November in town and visited some places in the hinterland to explain the credit policy.

Special aid for the hinterland

During the first weeks of January 1989, we observed continuous coming and going of worried *campesinos* at the UNAG office in Bluefields, asking themselves and the delegates of the farmer union how they were going to survive in the coming summer months. Many of them had come to the city just before or shortly after the hurricane to look for shelter and food. Now they wanted to return to their farms and communities. These men and women, carrying with them the few belongings they had rescued from Joan in colourful plastic bags, came to see MIDINRA, IRENA, and UNAG to ask for more help. However, at that time, their basic needs were greater than the material and organizational resources available and most of the requests for support remained unanswered.

"The food donations have finished," was one of the first comments of Antonio, one of the UNAG delegates, when we met him during the third week of January 1989. Antonio, who had lived for about 15 years on the coast, was one of the first members of the UNAG in the region coming from the ranks of the Rural Workers Association (ATC) in the Kukra River area where he owned a farm. The Contras forced him to leave the countryside; being an UNAG member he was a target for attack and assassination. With the hurricane he lost his house. In January 1989, when the Cuban construction *brigadistas* arrived to start building 1000 houses (see below), Antonio was among the future beneficiaries of this project. This meant that he had to combine working on the project with his tasks for the UNAG, which on some occasions gave rise to a conflict of duties. This problem was shared by hundreds of others, who for many months tried to balance their efforts between work at home and at the office. This, as can be understood, caused many problems of coordination.

However, despite the bad news about the donations, Antonio was eager to tell us that the emergency committee, in cooperation with INSSBI and UNAG, was working on a new food program, limited to the families who were the most affected by the hurricane. In practice, the majority of these families continued to be the ones living in the hinterland of Bluefields. At the end of the month, the new program was announced and the delegates of UNAG and INSSBI prepared to execute it, although they would be handicapped by the lack of gasoline, which made regular visits to the communities impossible. The new donations then, were supposed to provide the basic minimum for the farmers to survive **and** a stimulus to rededicate themselves to producing basic crops. In other words, restoring production was now a main political objective of the program.

In the beginning, distribution of food at all stages was directed by both institutions. INSSBI organized transport from Managua and El Bluff to Bluefields and supervised the distribution of quotas at the regional level. UNAG was responsible for organization at the local level, which implied undertaking a population census, explaining the program, and distributing shares among the

communities; this was done through a network of local leaders and UNAG members. Rice, beans, sugar, cooking oil, canned meat, and clothes were handed out in the first package.

No major difficulties were encountered except in the census. As Antonio explained to us, "The hinterland of Bluefields was assigned to the UNAG. In our census, we counted that 905 families live in this area; however, we only receive food for 850 families. This means that 55 families will not receive their quota." When we checked the census, we found that it registered 921 families with a total of 5347 people (UNAG-census, 1 February 1989).[8] In January, the problem was solved by distributing the quota for 850 families among the 921, thus reducing the quantity per family. From February 1989 on, the solution presented by Antonio was to exclude 71 families whose economic resources were considered sufficient to guarantee subsistence. Some protests were heard from these families, but without much impact.

The distribution of the second package, however, caused more serious problems, this time of a sociopolitical and organizational nature. The first of these concerned the cost of loading and transporting the products. UNAG, in the name of INSSBI, asked the farmers to pay for the transport from El Bluff to Bluefields and for transport within the city (from wharf to storehouse to wharf). Moreover, the people who delivered the products to the communities (by boat or horse) asked the families to pay for their transport expenses. Neither UNAG nor INSSBI took time to explain these procedures to the beneficiaries of the program, which caused many to comment that "they [UNAG and INSSBI] are selling the donations to us." At the same time, a certain tension was created between families who lived close to the city and those who lived farther away. The latter were obliged to pay more for the same quota. Tension existed also between families who had some money to pay for transport and those who did not.

Another problem emerged when one of the local leaders, or at least that was how the man in question presented himself at the UNAG, did not distribute all the food among the families of his community, keeping part for his own use and to sell. Unfortunately, Antonio was involved in this problem as he had given the food to the "leader" believing him to be in charge of the distribution **and** of a new "project" to organize a cooperative in his community. This plan was denounced at the UNAG by others from that community.

Supervision of the program turned out to be another problem. Delegates of UNAG and INSSBI declared that not all the families were doing all they could to restore production on their farms, one of the basic goals of the support program. Because of these problems, the original plan was revised and new steps were proposed to improve its execution. Regular visits to the communities were planned to "inspect the distribution of food, production, and the organization of the people" (Antonio). These visits were supposed to strengthen local organization and to explain once more the goals of the program, stressing above all the necessity of re-establishing production. UNAG took on this task as we will see in the section entitled Encounters.

Meanwhile, in Bluefields, the first of 300 Cuban *brigadistas* arrived to start building 1000 houses for the people affected by the hurricane. This special project was the first concrete step in an ambitious plan for a new Bluefields elaborated by the regional government. This plan contemplated, among other features, the relocation of people residing in the swampy areas of the El Canal, Beholden, and Old Bank neighbourhoods whose houses had been swept away by Joan.

However, the inhabitants of these areas had their own ideas about this plan. They made them very clear to Lumberto Campbell, head of the emergency committee and (former) presidential delegate of the region, when he met them to discuss their relocation. Lumberto Campbell's arguments that Bluefields should be rebuilt in a more orderly fashion and that residing in swampy zones was not healthy ("How can the revolution permit that people live in swamps? It cannot!") clashed with the opinions and feelings of the people who were actually living there. They pointed out that they had grown up there, had friends, and worked near the bay and sea, which provided many with their basis of subsistence. The presidential delegate was unable to sway the residents. Although some families moved to other neighbourhoods, the majority rebuilt their homes where they had been before the hurricane.

The arrival of the *brigadistas* coincided with a halt to food donations for the urban population and the re-establishment of normal supply routes from Rama and Puerto Limón (Costa Rica) to Bluefields. During this period, the UNAG was informed that INSSBI would become responsible for the distribution of new, but reduced amounts of aid.

The work of the UNAG, already difficult, was made even more complicated by a series of policy measures at the national level. As a result of the adjustment and stabilization program, the union's agricultural enterprise, ECODEPA, was forced to become a 100% commercial enterprise operating without state subsidies (Stahler-Stolk 1990: 74). The new and more restrictive credit policy and the increase costs of agricultural inputs (machetes, fertilizers, herbicides) and transport had a severe impact on many of its members. Furthermore, the UNAG was not excluded from the process of "*compactación*" or reduction of the state apparatus. The office in Bluefields had to reduce its staff from twelve to seven employees.

The continuing critical situation for many families and the differences in short-term solutions were confirmed by a report of the Commission on Agrarian Reform and Farmer Organization, in which the state of affairs in eight subzones affected by the hurricane was analyzed (Hodgson 1989). In some of these subzones, farmers had managed to start working again, producing charcoal (Kama River) or fishing (Rama Cay), to survive without depending completely on aid. However, in the Kukra River area and the immediate area around Bluefields, farmers would need help until April 1989 when harvests were expected. The report recommended, therefore, "that it would be convenient to help them" and "that they remain in the countryside to produce and that they do not come to the city" (Hodgson 1989: 3).

And what about the forest?

> "How is the state of the forest?" "Destroyed."
> "How are the soils?" "Destroyed."

These were the answers given by a *campesino* from Kukra River to our first questions when we picked him up from an overloaded *cayuco* in our motorboat on a trip to the area in November 1988. From the very beginning, the question of the badly damaged tropical rainforest went beyond the reconstruction potential of both the region and the country. Nicaragua's human and material resources were insufficient to develop and realize solutions to the problems created by the hurricane, e.g., an evaluation of the damages, the extraction and use of the lumber on the ground, prevention of forest fires, and programs of reforestation. Moreover, in the case of Bluefields, equipment of the regional lumber company, COMABLUSA, was badly damaged. The national and regional governments began to look for international expertise and financial support to help with these tasks. In the first months of 1989, both support was offered, partly as a direct answer to the demand for help and partly because the destruction of the tropical forest had aroused the interest of scientists and entrepreneurs alike.

In the meantime, as I have indicated, IRENA-Bluefields had started a first evaluation of the damages. After a rapid appraisal, it was estimated that 2500 km^2 of forest had been destroyed: an equivalent of 12.5 million m^3 of lumber, representing a value of US$312.5 million. Local farmers, of course, tried to assess in their own way the effects on their lands, flora, and fauna, as the answers of the Kukra River *campesino* demonstrate.

On 26 November 1988, two forest experts from the IRENA head office came to Bluefields for a four-hour visit "to consult the people from the region on a management and protection plan for the forest," including the prevention and control of forest fires. This plan was quickly discussed in the IRENA office. In general, George Brooks commented positively on it, although he criticized its "top-down" character, which went against the plan to include local opinions and experience. He also made clear that, without help from Managua, the plan could not be achieved; the participation of the UNAG, MIDINRA, the regional radio station "Zinica," and the news bulletin "Sunrise" would also be indispensable. After listening to these comments, the two experts flew back to Managua. That morning, IRENA's director had received orders from MIDINRA's regional delegate to formulate a plan to prevent possible forest fires. Moreover, from the director of COMABLUSA, he received the bad news that no extra equipment (from companies in other regions) would become available to extract trees and lumber.

In December, the regional government asked IRENA for a more detailed evaluation on the damages, concrete plans to prevent and control forest fires, the installation of portable sawmills in the communities, reforestation, the production of charcoal, and the extraction of lumber taking into account already existing regional proposals on the last three issues. These plans were to be prepared within one week. Hence, IRENA's tasks were accumulating rapidly.[9] The number of

proposals raised at the national level increased at the same time, although often without significant coordination with the regional level. It was only through several articles in *La Barricada* that George Brooks and others learned about these plans.

While Brooks and his small team set to work on the projects, he waited for orders from Managua, where it was decided that the reforestation plan would be assigned to the Swedish government's specialized organization, SWED-FOREST, which had promised US$5 million for this task. SWED-FOREST would also help with the reactivation of COMABLUSA, Bluefields' main lumber company.

However, presentation of the first plans was scheduled for April 1989. In February 1989, the government decided to give IRENA-Managua through the People's Forestry Corporation (CORFOP, a para-statal lumber company), the responsibility for extraction of lumber. This decision was a clear indication that the lumber question and possible profits from sales had become part of a struggle for control between ministries and between different hierarchical levels inside ministries. A short-term result, however, of these ongoing struggles was that things seemed to stay as they were.

In these weeks, innumerable meetings were held and new delegations were sent to the Atlantic Coast to evaluate the state of affairs. CORFOP, given the fact that the country did not have the capacity to extract the amount of wood accumulated in the affected area, proposed to ask for help from international or transnational lumber companies. At the end of January 1989, however, nothing concrete had been achieved, because no precise data existed about the amount of lumber available or about the sites of extraction. It seemed that during the summer of 1989 no wood at all would be extracted. On the other proposed projects, nothing concrete had been achieved.

Encounters

As I have discussed in the section on the food program, the UNAG planned to make a series of visits to the hinterland to assess and reinforce the execution of the program at the local level. An additional goal was to put pressure on farmers to start producing food crops, a condition imposed by the regional government and emergency committee for the continued distribution of food. In the last week of February 1989, the first of these visits was made by Antonio (UNAG) and the head of MIDINRA's agrarian reform department Edgar Vaquedano, accompanied on one trip by a representative from INSSBI. They held meetings with producers from San Mariano, Caño Negro, Musilayna and Esconfram Creeks, and Malopí.

In this section, I present a close-up view of some of the discussions, interactions, and negotiations that took place during these visits.[10] Using situational analysis (van Velsen 1967; Mitchell 1983; see also, Heijdra 1989) will give us an insight into how the program, its goals, and political message were actually presented, justified, interpreted, and debated face-to-face. Often, it is in these contexts, where material resources are distributed and rewards or punishments given out, that we are able to learn about differences and conflicts of

interests and perceptions. It can also show us the often pragmatic and contradictory character of people's opinions and attitudes as they try to come to terms with new circumstances to defend interests, demonstrate their power, or keep from losing face. In this case, it will show us how people working for the Sandinist government and the national farmer union perceived problems faced by the farmers of the hinterland and how they interacted with some of them, making use of their knowledge, experience, and skills, and on the basis of access to institutional support (through the ministries and the union). The dramatic situation caused by the hurricane, in which many new problems emerged and existing ones were revealed, clarified these perceptions and relations, which in turn would be influenced by these encounters.[11]

San Mariano: "Please tell me what are your worries?"

San Mariano is a settlement located on a small hill about 15 km north of Bluefields. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter III, its 18 families are from Punta Gorda where repeated Contra attacks forced them to leave. After a long odyssey, they were resettled by the regional government and army at San Mariano and became members of a new cooperative in charge of a coconut palm plantation. This plantation, part of the Sandinist plans to develop agroindustrial complexes on the Atlantic Coast, belonged to the regional state-owned coconut company, which until 1990 was under the direction of MIDINRA. Apart from their work on the plantation, for which they receive a miserly salary, the members of the cooperative cultivate subsistence crops, collectively and individually. Occasionally, they also fish, cut lumber, or make charcoal. Before Joan reached the coast, women and children of the settlement were evacuated. Surprisingly, only two of the 175 ha of cocopalms belonging to the cooperative suffered serious damage. However, the *ranchos* of all 18 households were blown away and many personal belongings were lost.

When we arrived on 25 February 1989, the president of the cooperative, Bernardo, welcomed us by saying that the situation was very bad. They had sown 30 *manzanas* (1 manzana = 0.7 ha) of corn, but without result, partly because rats had invaded the crop. Six *manzanas* of beans had been attacked by a plant disease and an equal area of cassava had been destroyed by the hurricane. Only two *manzanas* of quequisque, a tuber, remained relatively unscathed. They did not have rice.

"We feel *afligidos* [grieved, sad], because here we do not harvest basic grains. There are too many plagues. In Punta Gorda we had it good, cultivating bananas, coco, corn, beans."

The meeting was held at the top of the hill, under an improvised roof of plastic that, moved by the wind, produced so much noise that everyone had to shout to be heard. Ten male cooperative members accompanied by a number of children were present. After 15 minutes, some women approached the group, but they remained at considerable distance from the core of the meeting. After introducing the representatives of MIDINRA, INSSBI, and CIDCA, Antonio opened the meeting by asking people to explain their worries and problems (*inquietudes*). Speaking for the cooperative, Francisco, one of the members, answered this question:

> First, concerning housing, we do not know anything about zinc nor do we know about lumber. In the surroundings of San Mariano they have distributed zinc, but here we have not received anything. About the *tienda campesina*, I can say that is halfway its realisation. Only of some of the products for sale we do not know the prices. Wire: we need wire to enclose the cows that are causing damages to the cocopalms. We have requested a loan from the bank, but so far we do not know the answer yet. Fourth, this is a question from the surroundings of San Mariano: what is the news about the financing of corn, beans and quequisque? In relation to the maintenance of the coco, we have serious problems, due to several plagues. In the sowing of the *postrera* we lost six *manzanas* of beans that were financed by the bank. We also lost the corn that was eaten by rats. We need an area to work. We want to produce, but there is no land and over there in Barcelona, the soils are only good for cattle. For the 18 members we need at least 100 *manzanas*. And eight, we need a motorsaw to saw lumber for our houses.

Here, Bernardo intervened to explain that they had come to an agreement with "them" (MIDINRA), as he pointed out to Edgar. MIDINRA had promised to get an electric saw and six barrels of gasoline for the cooperative, but now they had received neither. Antonio asked whether the women were members of the cooperative. Bernardo answered that the women cultivated cassava or produced charcoal and, therefore were members of the cooperative.

Edgar was given the opportunity to respond to the worries. With reference to the land question, he explained once more that MIDINRA had made a deal with a farmer in the vicinity of the settlement concerning about 300 *manzanas*. One of the members remarked angrily that on a visit last week to the farmer, the man had told them that only in the presence of MIDINRA he would arrange the affair. Edgar replied that the farmer was not correct, and that he was surprised to find out that this problem still existed. He wondered whether not enough pressure had been put on the farmer by the cooperative. The same member replied, in an even more furious tone, that the farmer had told him that "the people from there [Bluefields-MIDINRA] should come to settle things." A solution was not found. In the silence that fell, Antonio decided to tackle one of his own points of interest.

> **Antonio**: We have to think about a work plan for the cooperative...
> **Francisco**: We have already a work plan. In the morning we will work in the coco and in the afternoon make the wire. We will work one week on basic grains and than continue with the coco. But what we want to know is about burning. Without burning the soils we always have plagues.
> **Antonio**: It's going to be clear that the sowing of the *primera* is going to be difficult.
> **Bernardo**: We can cultivate tubers without burning, but rice and corn we cannot. We have to think about next year if by then we are still alive...

Confronted with this bitter remark of the president, Antonio switched his discourse to a more abstract level, referring to the national situation and the policy

of UNAG to support the farmers. He pointed out that they were doing their best, but, unfortunately, UNAG had to deal with other problems as well as the ones of San Mariano. The problem was really serious, because the country was spending more than it was earning. Then he jumped to the issue of loans:

> **Antonio:** The financing of basic grains in this region has always been a failure. This year the Central Bank announced a new policy: no more loans for basic grains!
> **Bernardo** (who was now standing in front of Antonio and Edgar): We will cultivate basic grains without loans...
> **Antonio:** And what about these plagues? Is this negligence of the coconut company? What happened with the *tecnico*?
> **Edgar:** There is only one *tecnico* in the zone, who also has to visit the other projects. A few days ago another one came to Bluefields, who has worked here before. One of the two has to stay permanently with you.

As the fragments of conversation show, the four men dominated the discussion. The others, women and men alike, did not participate, nor were they asked to say anything. As we will see in the other encounters, this pattern was a characteristic of most meetings.

The last part of the conversation focused on the distribution of food, in which Antonio emphatically delivered a political message. The essential point of the message was that the farmers were obliged to produce the *gallo pinto* or rice and beans (the basis of Nicaraguan meals) for the people in the cities, while, for example, doctors provide medical care and teachers education. Hence, the food program was only for the people who were really affected by the hurricane. Although in San Mariano there was no problem in understanding this, in other communities, cattle farmers were using their money to help themselves. Returning to more concrete issues, Antonio explained that, in March, everyone would receive a card on which family numbers were indicated and quotas allotted. Furthermore, everyone had to pay for the transport of the aid: 2000 cordobas per family to UNAG, plus the cost of transport from Bluefields to the settlement to be paid to the person in charge of the job.

Musilayna and Esconfram: "If the community decides to burn, this will be the law!"

This meeting took place in Bluefields on 26 February 1989, in front of the house of one of the UNAG leaders in the Esconfram Creek area. This farmer owned a farm in the hinterland and a house in town, a practice common among many of the families living close to Bluefields. In many cases, members of these households travel back and forth between countryside and their houses in town, where they undertake other activities in addition to agriculture and livestock. Among these families, some of the most prosperous producers in the hinterland can be found.

Antonio and Edgar arrived 45 minutes late, which led to some critical comments among the approximately 50 visitors. In fact, some had already left. To make matters worse, in an attempt to compensate for their late arrival, Antonio

started his speech with the remark that not everyone had shown up; the last time there were at least 80 farmers present. This led to a retort from one of the farmers, "Yes, some died, because there is no food," followed by laughter from the crowd.

Antonio then rapidly explained the aims and agenda of the meeting: they wanted to discuss food, zinc, the production plan for the *primera*, the harvest results of the *postrera*, and *inquietudes*. To this he added the *gallo pinto* message, in more or less the same words as he had used at the meeting in San Mariano. One of the farmers asked to speak.

> **Camilo:** Since five days we are having fires in the zone.
> **Antonio:** And we are only in February! What will happen in March, April? A fire from here to Corinto? [the main harbour on the Pacific coast] We have to do something! I do not know what you think you are going to do. One has to sow corn or cassava or quequisque. Yesterday we had a talk with some farmers from Caño Negro who told us that one can clean a circle around a parcel and sow with burning. What do you think about this idea? What we want is to come to a kind of consensus about burning. Are we going to burn or not?

Having said this, Antonio repeated his political message about *los campesinos* who are responsible for providing food to the cities in exchange for the services offered by doctors and teachers. After this statement, several farmers expressed their ideas about the burning issue. One remarked that yesterday he had visited George Brooks (IRENA's director) to ask about folders on the prevention and control of forest fires, but he had returned empty handed. He concluded: "We are immobile, getting nowhere."

Another rejected the idea of the Caño Negro farmer, observing that it was impossible to control sparks that would jump in all directions. A third recommended seeing all the farmers to arrive at a single strategy. A fourth agreed with this, because they had to avoid someone prejudicing the others. However, two others said that they opted for burning, because corn crops would not produce otherwise. They suggested making a small fire and getting a group of friends to help control it. These ideas were opposed by the people who had spoken first. Others joined the discussion.

One farmer proposed burning in the late afternoon or night, as they do in Chontales (the cattle region). According to him, the problem was that farmers in Bluefields did not have the knowledge nor the experience for this technique. This remark led to a murmur in which everybody repeated his or, in a few cases, her point of view. One of the first speakers raised his voice and proposed to vote for or against burning. They agreed on this. All but four voted for burning.

Meanwhile, the whole group (including five women) had come closer to Antonio and Edgar, who were now completely enclosed. It seemed like everyone was expecting a final statement from them to conclude the difficult discussion and confirm their vote. Before they could speak, however, the farmer who had referred to the folders stated loudly that if they didn't burn the fields, they could not survive. Several others voiced agreement.

Antonio intervened by saying, "If the community decides to burn, this is going to be the law! As I said at the beginning of the meeting, the objective is to come to an agreement about burning or not." After a short pause, he continued to explain that this did not reflect an official point of view of the UNAG or his own opinion about what would be the best course of action. One of the voters against burning reacted bitterly to Antonio's words alleging that if they were going to burn, soils, water, and trees would disappear. "And us, we will have to leave too!"

At this point, once again a confusion of voices forced Antonio to call for order. When things had calmed down, he asked Edgar, who so far had been silent, to speak to the group. Edgar opened his speech with a rather technical explanation about the damaging effects of burning on the soils in Nicaragua. Nowhere in the country does the fertile layer exceed 25 cm. In the hinterland of Bluefields, this layer is only about 15 cm or even less. Therefore, "to burn is to *joder* [destroy] the soil, each year less fertility and thus meaning lower productivity until we reach 5 cm and they do not serve any more." The group listened in silence as Edgar continued:

> The only advantage is that we have to work less when one burns and there are less plagues. However, MIDINRA is guaranteeing pesticides. We simply do not have the practice here of sowing without burning. Right now, we have the law against fires that from now on we are going to apply more strictly! The majority of people here dedicate themselves to the production of charcoal and to the cutting of lumber. Of the 50 or 100 *manzanas* they have, they only use two *manzanas* for agriculture. This practice cannot continue like this! MIDINRA will send groups to the *campo* to check production and control the amount of work done. We will take drastic measures. From the beginning of this year until now we have annulled five land titles and ten permissions for the fabrication of charcoal. If one doesn't dedicate himself/herself to *la tierra*, we will take away his/her title!

These threats were followed by the warning that titles obtained through a notary were not valid if they were not also ratified by MIDINRA's agrarian reform department. Edgar ended his discourse by saying,

> MIDINRA can be blamed to a certain degree for this situation. We know that. In foregoing years there was an organizational disorder, but from now on we are going to revise all of that. From tomorrow onward we are going to try to normalize this with the aim to avoid conflicts. It is almost definite that where people burn, we will take away permissions. A certain number of persons will be affected.

While Edgar explained this confrontational stance of the ministry, the group had again come close to him and Antonio. Most of the audience was visibly affected by his words, which were in such a sharp contrast to the point of view presented by Antonio. Antonio continued the meeting by asking if anyone had a question about Edgar's speech. Nobody answered and Antonio declared the meeting closed. Whether this meant that a consensus was reached, remained unclear, at least to me.

Forest fires!

On 1 March 1989, news reached Bluefields about three big and rapidly expanding forest fires in the hinterland, spreading from the banks of the Caño Negro, Kukra River, and Dokuno-Turswani River. These fires were a threat to the region, given the enormous quantities of lumber on the ground and the absence of any means to combat the fires, at an institutional level and among the rural population.[12] The same day, MIDINRA and IRENA, in coordination with the UNAG, held an emergency meeting that resulted in a decree to prohibit burning in the hinterland, while hoping that the existing fires would be halted. This decree implicitly blamed the peasantry for causing the fires, although this was based on assumptions.

During the weeks that followed, this emergency measure became an integral part of the reconstruction program, as was demonstrated during the second series of visits that Antonio made to the hinterland. In March, meetings were held with producers from Caño Negro (for a second time), Dokuno-Torsuani-El Pavón-Santa Martha, Magnolia-El Paraíso-El Mango, Krisimbila, and Mahogany River (two meetings). In April this series was followed by a meeting with the persons responsible for the distribution of food to the whole hinterland to discuss the execution and problems of the program.[13]

At the end of the same month the UNAG organized a general assembly in Bluefields of people representing all the hinterland "communities" and delegates from the regional government, several ministries, and the regional leaders of the farmers' union. According to the UNAG's regional president, despite the food aid program, the majority of the rural population continued to face extremely difficult conditions that required concrete alternatives and the help of the government and its institutions.

Given its importance in our analysis of the reconstruction program, I will present some excerpts from the proceedings of this assembly. However, before focusing on this "face-to-face" meeting, as it was named by the union's president, we will go to Krisimbila, a community on the banks of the Escondido River, about 30 km from Bluefields. Here, on 11 March 1989, Antonio presided over one of the post-forest-fire meetings; Edgar did not attend this time.[14]

Krisimbila: "If we do not burn, what alternative do we have?"

The meeting took place in the more or less rebuilt *rancho* of the person responsible for the food program and the local UNAG delegate. Twelve men and three women from a total of 23 families, were present. The three women stood together in the doorway and said very little during the discussion. Antonio put only the issues of food and burning on the agenda. From the beginning, the discussion focused on the desolate situation of the families.

> **Pedro:** We don't have money to buy one single pound of salt!
> **Carlos:** We are all in the same situation... We have sown corn and beans, but the harvests are very bad because of the many plagues that we have.

> The beans are all lost. It is not that we do not do all we can, we have to fight, but we are completely in ruins! [in a desperate tone]
> **Daniel**: The only solution would be a motorsaw. There is lumber enough...
> **Carlos**: Not being able to sow, not being able to harvest, we will have to look for another place to live...
> **Alberto**: We sow beans and they were looking good. Then the plague arrived. With these sowings we are *listos*. [lost and without hope]
> **Daniel**: The only solution is the motorsaw. With that there will be movement of work.

At this moment Antonio intervened. Looking a bit annoyed with this desperate flow of problems, he pressed the group to think about other alternatives than just the acquisition of an electric saw. "Yes, of course, but if we do not burn, what alternative do we have?" was the answer he got from Carlos.

Antonio replied to this remark with an explanation of the dangers of burning for the community and for others in the vicinity of Krisimbila. The group seemed to understand and agree with these arguments. Then Daniel tried another tack:

> **Daniel**: You cannot help us with one of these machines? [He is making an allusion to the portable sawmills, see below.] Yesterday in Bluefields they told us that there are 12 machines and 17 communities. They told us that they still did not distribute the machines...
> **Antonio** (uncomfortable): There is a commission that decides about that. In the commission the churches, MIDINRA and we [UNAG] participate. The commission decides about the distribution of the donations. I cannot decide about this. They will make the distribution on the basis of the number of people in each community. We still do not know to which communities the portable sawmills nor the motorsaws will go.
> **Daniel**: But with one machine we will defend ourselves!
> **Carlos**: You know that this zone is the most affected! Here the winds destroyed everything. We had 25 cows. Right now we do not even have one!

Here one of the women added that they were unable to make use of a loan from the bank. Antonio, driven into a corner by these arguments, promised that they would "*gestionar eso*," or ask for that (he probably meant loans, but to me this was not completely clear). However, Carlos was not satisfied with this answer, asking again for help from Antonio, who he thought was the person "who knows how things were working."

Antonio did not reply to this, but instead observed that waiting for the arrival of the machines was not a solution. Moreover, he alleged that this was not the objective/task of the producers, whose responsibility was to look for a way out of the problems. As an example, he suggested cultivating cassava or plantains, which they could sell on the market. With the money obtained from that, they could buy rice.

"Yes, in those days when we cultivated coco, cacao, oranges... we had something to sell and buy food," was the answer Antonio got from Daniel. Pedro added that they were working already when the ban on burning was decreed. They concluded

the meeting with some final questions about the distribution of zinc, the new loan policy of the bank concerning basic grains, and ECODEPA. However, much to my surprise, the last word had not been said.

> **Carlos**: Antonio, could we sow rice in these palm areas in front of the Malopi River? [He meant a part of the Caño Negro zone where one of the forest fires had passed and "cleaned" the way for cultivation.]
> **Antonio** [thinking about this idea]: Well..., we have to see this... and if we do this, it has to be in a very good organized form.
> **Carlos**: This a big piece of land, from Monkey Rich river upwards. If you help us with obtaining the seeds, we can sow there!
> **Antonio**: This of the seeds, I will check with the churches [involved in the distribution]. I will look at that. In the next meeting you have to present me a census of the persons who are going to work and sow there.

Nobody asked more questions about this issue. Carlos had one more string on his bow: he wanted to know if the bank was really going to finance the replacement of cattle that died in the hurricane. Antonio, after a short pause, told him that this was what they had said before, but there were problems with the *tecnico* and with the money. Besides, he explained, the bank itself had not decided which project they were going to finance. Therefore, he did not know if it was necessary to apply again. Thus the meeting finished.[15]

Prohibition of burning: playing with fire?

As we have seen, on 1 March 1989, MIDINRA in close coordination with IRENA and UNAG announced officially that the burning of farmland and forest was prohibited given the emergency situation created by the three forest fires in the region. The reasons MIDINRA-IRENA gave for this measure were threefold. In the first place, the ministry argued that the measure was to protect the peasantry from major disasters. By this was meant more forest fires when there were no means to combat them. A second argument was protection of flora and fauna in the region. The third was protection of the inhabitants of Bluefields, because an eastward turning wind could seriously threaten the city. These reasons were backed up with the argument that burning does have more disadvantages than advantages and that it represents just another of the many inadequate production techniques that peasants in the region use (these arguments were transmitted on Radio Zinica in interviews with the heads of both institutions). As we have seen, Edgar used these arguments during the meetings.

MIDINRA-IRENA offered the following alternatives, which were also presented by both Edgar and Antonio in the various meetings with the *campesinos*:

1. Guaranteeing continuation of the food program until July 1989, that is, the end of the dry season.

2. Providing electric saws and portable sawmills to extract most of the fallen trees, which would give the families the opportunity to rebuild their houses and would present an economic opportunity (selling lumber).
3. Providing the farmers fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides if they would plant without burning the fields.
4. Constructing improved charcoal ovens to produce charcoal in large quantities.
5. "Other alternatives," that could be developed to generate income. (No further explanations were given.)

Although the measure and the proposed alternatives were discussed and agreed upon among the three institutions at the office level in Bluefields, their transmission and defense in the field turned out to be subject to personal interpretations, contradictions, and misunderstanding on the part of the farmers. To some communities, Antonio presented the alternative to burn in a controlled way, based on the organization of squads and making use of some special techniques. Speaking for UNAG, Antonio, forced by the general discontent of the producers, said during some of the meetings, "We will do what you decide, on the basis of a general agreement; here there is no decree against burning." When confronted with this situation, Edgar, representing MIDINRA, responded radically; he said that burning would be considered a crime and people found burning could lose their land title or permit to produce charcoal.

The farmers were clearly not very happy with the measure and the alternatives proposed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reform and the UNAG. At the same time they openly showed their discontent with the ambivalent attitude of Antonio. Notwithstanding this general picture of the situation, we consider it important to point out that not all families were equally affected by the measure. Those who made a living from selling charcoal protested louder than those who had some other way of obtaining a minimal monetary income (by selling citricus, roots, milk, or meat). As a *campesino* from Mahogany River said, "One will not die from hunger if we can not burn our lands this year, but if they take away from us our charcoal, what are we going to do?" Not burning was accepted by some, but others said that it meant no harvests this year: "It is not that we do not want to plant in *crudo*, but the problem is that these soils do not permit it. If they do not produce when one burns, even less when you do not burn!" declared a *campesino* from Caño Negro.

Concrete alternatives to the traditional practice, e.g., the introduction of agroforestry systems, were not offered by the institutions. Critical comments on the other proposed alternatives were also made. The provision of pesticides and herbicides for most of the farmers was not a real alternative, because they did not have the money to buy them. Moreover, their use in the Atlantic region with its specific climate is considered inappropriate.

Others expressed doubts about the continuation of the food program: "Are they going to maintain us with food? Do we have security? The time will come that the state does not have donations any more," said a *campesino* from Musilayna Creek.

Behind this question lies a more profound feature of the rural economy, which was made clear by a farmer from the same area in one of our interviews: **"We do not want that they give us our food, what we want is that they let us work!"** (my emphasis).

The portable sawmill project

The distribution of electric saws and portable sawmills could have been a viable option were it not that in the hinterland of Bluefields only two locations were given access to these machines: San Francisco on the Kukra River and Sam Brown on the Kama River. This project was managed by the Instituto de Desarrollo de la Iglesia Morava (IDSIM) with money from a Swedish nongovernmental organization. IDSIM is the social development agency of the Moravian church on the Atlantic Coast with its head office in Bluefields.

In practice, this implied that the machines were "given" to communities that maintained strong relations with IDSIM, because of religious and political affinity: the communities of the Pearl Lagoon Bay and on the Grande River. Another reason behind the distribution pattern was the fear among government delegates that the peasant population in the hinterland of Bluefields would take the opportunity to cut also the trees that were still growing, leaving the region without forest. Moreover, they feared that the operations of the COMABLUSA company, that had cut lumber in the hinterland, would be affected. Once again, the allocation of aid became a matter of politics.

MIDINRA's proposal to distribute electric saws and portable sawmills to the areas affected by the hurricane was an alternative that promised to solve at least some of the basic problems of the farming population in the hinterland: the need to rebuild their houses and farms and the need to generate income on a short-term basis. Such income seemed assured because large amounts of lumber were needed to rebuild the city of Bluefields.

However, for most of the farmers, this project remained a dream, or, in political terms, an empty promise. That it was empty was very probably known by MIDINRA at the time the so-called "alternative" was presented. Only in a few places and for a short time was an electric saw heard, cutting the fallen trees that obstructed paths to the communities. For example, in Caño Blanco and Musilayna, CEPAD, an evangelical nongovernmental organization, lent a machine to small groups of farmers. Although some of them ingenuously managed to use the saws to cut some lumber for the reconstruction of their own farms, these were exceptions and "against the rules" of CEPAD.

As I indicated above, the portable sawmill project was administrated by IDSIM. With money from the Swedish government, the proposal was to buy 25 "woodmizers," small and very practical portable sawmills that could easily be transported to the communities in the region. People could learn to operate them in a short time, another characteristic of the machines. In March 1989, 12 "mizers" had reached Bluefields; in the following weeks, they were, one by one, sent to Karawala,

Sandy Bay, Tasbapounie, Pearl Lagoon, Orinoco, Brown Bank, Kukra Hill, Kukra River, Kama River, and Rama Cay. The last two remained in Bluefields.

In practice, the machines were only temporarily "donated" to the communities; once the basic lumber needs of the inhabitants were satisfied, the machines had to be given back to IDSIM. According to one of the workers of the agency, this would make it possible to establish a kind of rotation system in the region. In the mentioned communities the machines were of great help for the people, as the head of the project in Pearl Lagoon told us in February 1989 (see also: ENVIO, March 1989: 12-15). At one time, Pearl Lagoon even had two sawmills at its disposal.

However, by the end of April it had become clear that very little had been achieved by the rotation plan. Despite their demands, the farmers from Krisimbila and other places in the hinterland did not get machines even for temporary use.

General assembly in Bluefields: face-to-face with the hinterland

On 29 April 1989, the *gran asamblea* took place in an atmosphere of frustration and expectation. Peasants were frustrated about the continuing problems that they were still confronted with six months after Joan. They also expected that the institutions involved in the reconstruction and reactivation of the hinterland could offer them concrete solution for these problems. What I consider important with regard to these observations is that the various ways in which the hinterland *campesinos* expressed those frustrations and expectations had a clear political content. They envisaged the multiple forms in which they were trying to start over and make a living as best they could as more than a material or economic issue. In fact, the farmers argued on the same ground as the regional government in its attempt to persuade the national government of the political nature of the reconstruction and reactivation process (as an integral part of the autonomy process).

Nevertheless, it seemed that this point was difficult to understand for the delegates of the institutions that participated in the assembly. If they did understand it, they were not willing to accept the consequences. These were attitudes, I think, that could not be explained or justified only by reference to the enormous material and organizational constraints at national and regional levels. Political motives played an even more important role.

Before the discussion with the delegates of the institutions took place, of which we will present several fragments, *campesinos* and *campesinas* met in three smaller groups to prepare their arguments. Spokesmen for these groups opened the plenary discussion by giving a summary of their opinions and necessities (see the section entitled Demands). After that, the delegates of MIDINRA and IRENA and the head of the regional government presented their points of view (see Replies and discussion). In between, farmers made additional remarks and posed questions.[16]

Demands

"We have come to the conclusion that the prohibition of burning is the biggest problem that exists in the hinterland of Bluefields. We consider that we have to burn, because otherwise there will be no production! Another problem concerns financing. In these moments we have completely been without financing. I don't know what prospect there is to continue going forward?"

"About the help of financing livestock, we demand favourable, fixed, annual interest rates so that the cattle farmers can develop the livestock project. We have another question: that the bank clarifies the last decree of president [Daniel Ortega] with respect to the remission of 50% of the debts for the 1989-1990 cycle. And which support does the bank give to the peasantry to produce basic grains?"

"Regarding the production of charcoal, we want to know what alternatives you have to subsidize the peasantry so that they can help themselves to obtain the basic products if they can not make charcoal. Because the peasants produce charcoal to subsidize themselves and buy some of the things they needs."

"About the food program, we observed that after the hurricane food and donations were given through the UNAG and there were no problems at all with this. When this task passed to INSSBI, they gave priority — I don't know for what reason, based on what policy — to some *compañeros* while others didn't get anything. Therefore, we ask for an explanation of this, because the hurricane was equal for everybody. We all have needs.... We also have some questions about the motorsaws and machines to utilize the lumber [in the forest]."

"Some of us discussed about housing: the answer was not to give only ten sheets of zinc, but to get help in order to obtain some motorsaws, even though financed [with a loan] so that these *compañeros* can work on the construction of their houses."

"Regarding education, we said that before the hurricane some places such as Caño Negro, Sheffield, and San Mariano had already formal primary school teaching up to third grade. But because the hurricane destroyed the schools, they ask for materials. The community is willing to rebuild the schools."

Replies and discussion

The first person to reply to these demands was George Brooks, the director of IRENA. He emphasized the economic importance of the "fuel material" (he meant simply wood) on the ground and the need to avoid burning this capital, including dead wood and new sprouts, which represented the material base for development of the whole region. He also observed that there was not sufficient knowledge of forestry or the organizational capacity among *el campesinado* to burn in a

responsible and controlled way. The ban on burning was not a capricious measure to harm them, he explained. Its aim was to avoid a worse misfortune. Furthermore, he said that, technically, burning only reduced labour costs while contributing to the destruction of the fertile top layer of the soil. He concluded that, given the fact that "it was not possible to change the mental structures of the peasantry from one day to another," the best alternative was to organize the communities into squads responsible for prevention and control of fires, a task that IRENA, although rather late, was undertaking.

This statement was contested by two farmers. The first argued that he understood that IRENA's director had reasons for his opinion, but the farmers had their own point of view. The second said that burning made clearing and sowing easier and improved harvests. Furthermore, he continued, "Was it not true that in comparison with the little damage caused by farmers who burn, CORFOF's tractors were causing much more destruction to the forest? And who was giving permission to cut the forest? IRENA!"

At this point, MIDINRA's subdirector spoke for the first time. After repeating the argument about loss of capital and evoking an image of the region as a desert, he raised some additional arguments:

> What you are producing, cassava, basic grains, corn, is important. But if this is not produced in this cycle, it will not have significant effects for the consumers. Of course, for **you** (his emphasis) it will be important and it will hit you hard. And about charcoal, we know that the region also needs charcoal. Therefore we have decided that we will concentrate the production of charcoal in only one area, that of the Kama River. This will reduce risks and permit us to control whatever emergency occurs.
>
> If the only alternative that you see is charcoal, we will have to create another zone where we guarantee minimal conditions to prevent fires. But we cannot allow, and you all know this very well, that in the whole area charcoal will be produced. This will be an irresponsibility from our part. Whatever major disaster will be the result of this, for us and future generations? *Hombre*! They will condemn us forever!
>
> It is better that we forget about getting these harvests that you can produce in this cycle or that we restrict ourselves to the small quantities that you will be able to sow in *crudo*. Because we know that you can sow without burning and you also know this! However, we are conscious that without burning production will be less than usual. But it would be irresponsible from our side to allow that all producers burn and you all know this!

The audience listened to this long discourse, but as several new questions for concrete alternatives proved, the farmers were not at all satisfied with the answers given by MIDINRA's subdirector. This is best summarized by the desperate exclamation of one of them: **"If we cannot burn nor produce charcoal, how are we going to survive?"**

The final word at the meeting was given to Lumberto Campbell, who, however, did not add any new perspective or solution. His recommendation to "hold on one more month before the rains would come" was not the kind of answer the peasants were waiting for. His words and the ones of MIDINRA's subdirector and IRENA's director could not mask the fact that reconstruction and re-establishing production would be much more complicated than foreseen for the hinterland peasantry. Moreover, the peasants considered reconstruction to be a political problem. As one *campesina* from Caño Blanco made clear, "They [the delegates] make nice promises to us. But they do not give us the benefits. **It is better that they do not give us anything!**"

Giving and taking

I have tried to identify the interpretations and interests of (some of) the people involved in the post-hurricane process. Confronted by the dramatic consequences of Joan, these men and women attempted to come to terms with the highly problematic situation in which they faced both new and already existing problems. Within this complex web of constraints, they developed a variety of ways to resolve their problems. Six months after the hurricane, conditions in the countryside continued to be critical and, aside from the food aid, most farmers had nothing.

The distribution of food turned out to be an ongoing process of transactions and negotiations in which new forms of organization and participation emerged that were not planned beforehand. New power relations and rules were established. Our analysis shows clearly that, in this process, aid became an intrinsic part of the political struggle to make a living. This requires an understanding of the social practice of aid in the same way as we have argued for a better comprehension of policymaking processes. The prohibition of burning reveals the complexity of the problems caused by the natural disaster. This measure "threw wood onto the fire." It provoked a direct confrontation between those who opposed and those who advocated burning. During the clash, interests and convictions concerning the viability of the agricultural and economic practices of the hinterland farmers were brought into dispute.

Because of the precarious situation, we obtained a very clear insight into these opinions and viewpoints. The direct and indirect effects of the hurricane threatened the modes of survival of the peasantry, not merely economically, but also politically as their practices were declared illegal **and** as their demands for alternatives were unanswered. This situation was surely not planned nor was the confusion, uncertainty, and desperation that followed.

It was in the meetings that many of these clashes came to the foreground. However, they also show us the attempt of some of the people involved to bridge gaps or to interlock projects (Long 1992: 309). Both forms of dealing in face-to-face contexts were based on the use of specific symbolic tools and discourse. The meetings were first used to present different accounts of the situation and to justify actions taken or intended. However, the discursive means of the principal actors

were clearly different. The peasants defended their various interests with reference to practical experiences, working styles and production techniques, immediate needs, and the lack of sufficient support from the institutions, including the UNAG. Edgar, IRENA's director, and MIDINRA's subdirector explained their views referring to general and long-term interests, lack of resources to help the peasantry, the need to share political responsibilities, and theoretical knowledge about production techniques and the absence of this knowledge among the farmers. We might call this the "inappropriate technology" argument (Hecht and Cockburn 1989: 98).

In the case of Antonio and Santos, we observed a mixture of all these arguments used rather pragmatically. I interpret Antonio's tacit "offer" to let the farmers decide together as a conscious attempt to negotiate a shared interpretation as a basis for action or non-action as in the case of burning.[17] His specific role as an element of the "making of the UNAG" in Bluefields and the region, I discuss in more detail in the next paragraph.

Another striking feature of the encounters is the almost total lack of participation by women in combination with the absence of an effort by Antonio and Edgar to ask for the views of the few women present at meetings or to inquire about the reasons for their absence. This feature is all the more significant given the crucial role of women in the organization of production, especially at that time in the numerous chores required to rebuild their lives. This division is based on gender roles that guide policies and tend to institutionalize access to state resources through men, thus marginalizing women. The underlying assumption is that men are responsible for "politics," while women take care of children and the home. Although some women more or less openly contested these roles, which meant negotiating with their husbands **and** with the representatives of the state or the UNAG (see also Chapter III), the men in charge of the reconstruction program did nothing to change this division.

The encounters provided strong intensification of the contacts between the regional government, the UNAG, and the farmers. Thus they became part of the complex and conflictive process of the formation of new (revolutionary) government and state structures and of organizations whose aim was to represent the interests of farmers and workers. As I discuss in more detail in part III, the efforts by coastal farmers to make a living before 1979 were of almost complete irrelevance to the conduct of state affairs. Although after 1979 the farming population of the hinterland continued in many respects to be left very much on its own, several initiatives and projects were developed by the state institutions and the UNAG. The point I want to make is that these encounters should be analyzed within these processes, but in a non-linear and non-deterministic way. As we have seen, the farmers contested many aspects of the presumed logic of the reconstruction program including the no-burning decree. We could say that they opposed the regulation and institutionalization imposed upon them by the regional government and the emergency committee.

Caught in the crossfire

We have seen in this chapter that the delegates of the UNAG played an important role in the reconstruction process. However, this role was a flexible one, continuously adjusted to new circumstances. They maneuvered themselves through the various organizational and political bottlenecks in which a pragmatic attitude was one of their main resources. On one side, they were facing the regional government's and party's (FSLN) expectations that demanded a "redefinition of the political and organizational project of the union, asking for more political contact with and influence of the farmers" (FSLN-RAAS 1989). On the other hand, they were confronted by the concrete demands from the mainly male *campesinos*. Moreover, each had his own interests, ideas, and aspirations. Given the significance of the UNAG at regional and local levels in "development affairs," we will discuss in more detail its organizing role in this concluding section.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the post-hurricane process is that the UNAG delegates did not always act aggressively for the farmers they were supposed to represent. Although we have seen that, in the meetings, Antonio did not agree with the no-burning measure, most of the other demands of the peasants were not dealt with by the union. What Antonio and the other delegates did during the meetings was listen and promise that perceptions and problems would be discussed at the regional level, but they did not offer any concrete solutions or alternatives. This was interpreted by the farmers as acceptance of the rules and regulations of MIDINRA and IRENA, an attitude firmly criticized by many of them.

This ambivalent position can be explained by taking into account the regional configuration of political power. The UNAG was assigned the role of supervising the execution process in the rural area. To carry out this role, conflicts with other institutions were avoided. Political and personal relations with delegates of the regional government, the FSLN — in which many of them played a crucial role and on which their political careers depended — and other ministries were kept smooth. Another explanation for this behaviour lies in the pragmatic manner in which the delegates did their work, in which they were more guided by a day to day view of their affairs than by a planned logic. Although in many ways they followed the vertical style of *bajar lineas* or transmitting policy lines to lower levels, so characteristic of the FSLN, their everyday mode of working was "*chapiollo*" or messy/chaotic as Santos Escobar so aptly called it (Tijerino and Vernooy 1991b: 171).

On the one hand, the UNAG delegates managed to organize a fairly effective distribution network making use of established contacts with local leaders and union members. This network helped in carrying out the population census and the practical work of distributing food, zinc, tools, and clothes. At the same time, however, the delegates were forced to explain and justify the specific form and rules of the different program elements. The farmers did not just receive aid, they also asked questions about it: Why do we get food for only six months? Why do we receive no more than ten sheets of zinc for each family? Why does IRENA

organize a prevention of forest fires campaign when one week later a no-burning decree is announced? Why are we not allowed to plant in the areas already burned by the fires? Why are the portable sawmills given to communities where the hurricane hardly caused any damage? These questions put the delegates in a difficult and controversial position. Unwilling or unable to provide answers, they found themselves caught in the crossfire.

The specific ways of managing, in the end, define what the UNAG is in practice: above all a social arena in which farmers, union delegates, and other parties try to realize institutional and personal goals by getting access to crucial and scarce resources or obtaining political influence (the steps to a political career). In this managing, the structure of the union is continuously (re)shaped and actions are undertaken according to changing circumstances. The concrete results of this — increased access to resources, political power, and the distribution of these among peasants and delegates alike — depend very much on the working styles, political motivations, and social skills of the actors involved.

Epilogue

On the sixth of March 1990, two weeks after the FSLN had been defeated in the national elections by the UNO, the director of IRENA aired his reflections on some of the events and experiences that I have documented in this chapter. During a seminar on the prevention and control of forest fires in which delegates from UNAG, MIDINRA, IRENA, and farmers from different "communities" participated, he made the following observations:

> When we look back at the experiences of last year, by which I mean the decree of no-burning, the repressive measures of MIDINRA, the cut on credits by the bank, and the explanations offered by the UNAG, we can conclude that all these [actions] have been without results because forest fires extended all over the region. Hence, I think that it would be absurd to repeat the same. Therefore, we have to recognize the traditions of the farmers, understand their needs, why they produce charcoal, and work with controlled fires. This is our objective and the reason for this seminar and our campaign this summer. The *campo* is responsibility of the farmers. We ask for your participation in this campaign.... About the results of the elections, I can say that there will not be any drastic changes and the program will continue as we have planned."

Despite these remarkable reflections on the outcome of the post-hurricane process concerning the interests of the hinterland farm enterprises, it turned out that one of the main regional political questions remained a different one. This question concerned how the natural resources of the region would be used and who would benefit from the money made by their exploitation.

From 1979 to 1990, the Sandinist government did not find a clear solution for this problem. Then, the hurricane made things worse, creating new problems and unknown future changes in the ecological conditions of the area affected by the

disaster. The change of government so far has not resulted in any concrete plans or activities that will bring order, although once more many ideas and proposals are put forward. In September 1990, George Brooks announced that a US lumber company would cooperate with CORFOP to extract wood in four specific areas affected by Joan. With the help of Swedish and Costa Rican experts, a plan would be formulated to develop eco-tourism in the region, which some consider to be the future of the Atlantic Coast. The only thing required to realize this, according to the director of IRENA, is "making the propaganda." Finally, IRENA-Bluefields is said to take a firmer stand concerning COMABLUSA, forcing the company to pay thousands of dollars of outstanding taxes. However, how these plans and good intentions are related to the livelihood and survival of the farmers and if a true lesson has been learned from the post-hurricane experience remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Part of the material and analysis of this chapter is based on the article by Tijerino and Vernooy (1989). This article was subsequently published in a slightly revised version as Chapter VI in Vernooy *et al.* (1991a).

2. For more detail, see Cortés Dominguez and Fonseca Lopéz 1988; ENVIO, November-December 1988: 12-26; *Pensamiento Propio*, December 1988: 27-41; *Sunrise*, February 1989.

3. **Notes from a researcher caught in a hurricane**
The dramatic experiences during and after the hurricane would provide us with enough material for another book. From Saturday, 22 October 1988, until the very last day of our stay in Bluefields at the end of October 1991, people would recall the ways in which they had resisted the natural forces, physically and emotionally. Here I will present some fragments of my own "struggle" with Joan, to capture an impression of how events in the days before and after 21 October occurred to me. Fortunately, I managed to keep my research notes dry!
- 18 October: Since Sunday evening it has been raining hard in Bluefields. Rumours are going around that a new hurricane (in August hurricane "Gilbert" left many without homes and belongings on Jamaica. "Gilbert" became the strongest hurricane of the century) is coming toward the Caribbean....
- 19 October: Yesterday's rumours were confirmed: a hurricane is on its way to the Caribbean. Everybody in town has been warned by a special emergency committee. Windows are being covered, antennas removed, and all loose objects brought inside. It was very hot today and without any wind: as they say "the silence before the storm." The latest news is that the hurricane will reach the Atlantic Coast tomorrow late in the afternoon and that its direction is toward Nicaragua. What shall I do? I think the best is to wait and be prepared.
- 20 October: It is 1300 hours and we are still waiting for Joan, as the hurricane has been baptized. This morning I woke up at 0330 by the sound of a loudspeaker in the streets: the emergency committee was mobilizing children, women, and old people to places more inland (Rama, Boaco, Managua). All morning a stream of people left the city by boat carrying with them the most necessary things. A little girl passed CIDCA carrying a small monkey in her arms on their way to the harbour and safer places. In town, everybody was buying large amounts of food to be prepared for the worst. Although you can feel a tense atmosphere, there is no panic and things seem to be done in an orderly way....
- 21 October: It is 1315 and we are still waiting for Joan. More people have been evacuated and more precautions taken. Everybody is prepared for the worst. I am nervous, but determined to make the best of it as all the others seem to be. The latest news is that Joan will reach the coast between 0200 and 0400 tonight hitting the shore somewhere south of Bluefields. This morning Daniel Ortega came to town to see if everything was organized well. A state of emergency for the whole country has been proclaimed.... Let us hope for the best.
- 23 October: ... I am alive and all right! as are the others with whom I stayed in the cultural centre. The hurricane has passed. It was terrible, terrible, and worse than we could ever imagine! It is hard to believe what has happened between 1800 the day before yesterday and 1100 yesterday! About 80% of Bluefields has been destroyed... It is impossible to describe how it looks. Between ten and fifteen persons died in the city, which is sad, very sad, but given the degree of destruction I think it is a miracle that not more persons have died... Sixteen hours we waited in fear, before the rains and incredible forceful winds slowed down and we could get out of the cultural centre (what was left of it). It is hard to understand how these hours passed.... Yesterday people were walking through the city with their few

belongings rescued from the disaster on their way back to what is left of their homes. Others were trying to start the reconstruction of their houses. Food, water and medical aid are being organized, the enormous amounts of "rubbish" in the streets cleaned away. "I have never seen this before," said Eliseo (like me a guest at the Cueto Hotel), a local former shipper with 18 years of experience on the oceans of the world....
- 26 October: The disaster is huge, all over the country! I just realized this today when the first newspapers came in showing pictures and stories about the coast and the other places affected (Rama, Corn Island, even in Managua).... At the same time it is incredible to see how people recover from the shock, returning to "normal" life... surviving.

4. In general, the policy of giving priority to institutions in matters of the distribution of zinc and other construction materials was accepted by the Bluefields population. However, some critical and skeptical comments could be heard. On 26 November 1988, I was present at the wharf where a boat from Costa Rica had arrived loaded with sheets of zinc for the roofs of ministries and other government buildings. A creole woman who was observing the arrival of the boat, said in a loud voice: "Look at the buildings of the state, they all have new roofs! Sandino [by which she meant the Sandinist government] knows how to handle his affairs.... Sandino should help the people, but first he takes care of himself! If you have money, you should arrange your own business. Like the Bible says, 'take care of yourself, then I will take care of you.' That is what you have to do, you know."

5. IRENA was created in August 1979 to manage the exploitation and preservation of the country's natural resources. Ever since its establishment the political authority of the institute has been challenged, by MIDINRA which demanded a more production-oriented position and by environmentalists who asked for a firmer stand concerning protection and regulation. For a short history and discussion of IRENA's role, see Wieberdink and van Ketel 1988: 139-157.

6. UNAG claims to have about 125,000 members and thus to constitute by far the most important popular organization in Nicaragua. However, I think that it is important to point out that many farmers are only members on paper. For example, UNAG automatically counts as members the men/women of cooperatives. UNAG-Bluefields has about 500 registered members. For an account of the history, goals, and role of UNAG, see ENVIO 1985 (September); ENVIO 1989 (May); UNAG 1986; Pérez Alemán 1990 (about the role of women in the UNAG); Serra 1991; Blokland 1989, 1991.

7. At the end of March 1989, a group of Contras attacked one of the cooperatives in Kukra Hill, killing two of its leaders. Earlier in the year a group attacked a UNAG motorboat on its way back from Pearl Lagoon to Bluefields. No one was harmed. In April 1989, a MIDINRA motorboat was ambushed on its way to El Cocal, a cocopalm plantation close to the San Juan River. Two barrels of gasoline and a large amount of food were stolen, but no one was injured. These attacks provoked fears and stress in the hinterland. In San Mariano, the members of the cooperative dug shelters to be prepared for an attack. They also organized patrols.

8. A new census was elaborated in March 1989, based on the actual distribution of food. This time, 815 families were registered (UNAG-census, March 1989). As I have mentioned, it was very hard to take a census in those days, because people were moving constantly from one place to another to organize themselves and their families. The flow of donations caused its own movement of people to where the aid was expected.

9. The first in-depth evaluation of damage to the forest was realized from 10 to 20 January 1989 by a group of US, Costa Rican, and Nicaraguan scientists and specialists in tropical rainforests. The study was a CIDCA project (in close cooperation with IRENA) and financed by OXFAM-USA as a first contribution to a long-term assessment of the damages caused to the forest in the region. I was asked by (now former) CIDCA's director Galio Gurdian to participate in the evaluation. Having very little knowledge of the complexities of the tropical rainforest and its ecology, this experience proved to be of great value for the rest of my research. It also strengthened my relationship with Santiago Rivas, whose life-story I describe in Chapter 6. Surprisingly, one of the main results of this first study was the observation that in the sampled areas the regeneration of sprouts seemed very promising, including almost all of the species present in the forest. No secondary forest or invasion species were encountered (see for details Yih *et al.* 1989). Subsequent evaluations, however, demonstrated that this initial regeneration pattern had changed and that invasion species had increased considerably (Vandermeer *et al.* 1991).

10. Of the first series of visits, I present the ethnographic data on the meetings held with the farmers from San Mariano and Musilayna-Esconfram Creek. What we are interested in is whether, given the socioeconomic differences between these locations, we could expect the encounters to proceed in different ways. However, it turned out that proceedings of these meetings were very similar to each other and the one organized with the "community" of Malopi, although, in the latter, a lot of attention was paid to problems with the census there. The meeting in Caño Negro was a conversation with only a few farmers as the majority of the "community" did not show up. As a result of this, Antonio fixed a new date for a second visit to explain the objectives of the meeting and discuss problems. One additional reason to focus on San Mariano and Musilayna-Esconfram lies in the connection of this chapter with Chapter III. The second and third of the three case studies of rural households that I will present in that chapter are related to these communities. An account of the post-hurricane situation in both sites provides an useful background for these case studies.

11. At the meetings, Antonio presented us or we presented ourselves as working for CIDCA, which we described as a study centre for Atlantic coastal problems and questions. We explained that we were interested in the ways in which the farmers were resolving the problems caused by the hurricane. We also expressed our intention to contribute in one way or another to these efforts. These encounters gave us the opportunity to tell about our own hurricane experiences as people asked about what had happened in Bluefields.

12. About two weeks later, I was asked by the director of IRENA to coordinate a group in charge of making a preliminary evaluation of the damages caused by the fires in the three areas mentioned. A forest expert from MIDINRA, a biologist from IRENA, and a Canadian forest technician, who happened to be in Bluefields and who was interested to provide assistance to the work of IRENA, participated in this group. Based on these evaluation trips, we observed that in the Caño Negro and Dokuno-Torsuani zones the fires had affected especially palm species. In the Kukra River zone we noticed that both palm species and hardwood trees had been (partially) burned. In all three the areas, the fires had also burned most of the new growth that had appeared after the hurricane. We estimated that by this date 21,000 ha of forest had already been damaged by the flames (Vernooy *et al.* 1989).

13. At this meeting (1 April 1989) nine of the *responsables* were present. Antonio, obviously in a very bad shape because of a hangover, tried to preside over the session in an organized way. Without much success, he repeated himself many times and jumped from one subject to another. The subjects all had to do with problems in the execution of what was becoming an impossible task of coordinating the food program (many families could not pay

the cost of the transport; the census lists were never up-to-date; unacceptable amounts were being stolen between the harbour of El Bluff and Bluefields). Moreover there were the problems of a supposed unfair distribution of zinc and other donations by the Catholic church; delays in the opening of the *tienda campesina* in Bluefields; and the still undefined loan policy of the bank. At the meeting no solutions were found for any of these problems.

14. I present the Krisimbila meeting assuming that the absence of Edgar could have an influence on the course of events. As we will see, one of the most striking features of this meeting was once again the pragmatic attitude of Antonio regarding the issue of no burning. He showed this pragmatism in all meetings with and without the presence of Edgar. The first post-fires meeting was held in Caño Negro on 2 March. About 30 people were present, among them 10 women, who remained silently at a distance from the group that sat and stood around Antonio and Edgar. At this meeting, Edgar suddenly interrupted Antonio's introductory words by stating that "burning from now on is prohibited, including the production of charcoal." Later, he added that "if somebody would be found burning, this would be considered a criminal act." As an alternative for not burning he proposed the use of pesticides and herbicides, products so far unused in the region. He announced that MIDINRA, UNAG, ECODEPA, and the bank were looking for ways to get these products to Bluefields. He also referred to new projects that would bring various saws and improved charcoal ovens to use the large amount of lumber on the ground. However, "these projects were not confirmed yet." Finally, he introduced a plan to organize seminars about the use of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. Some of the producers replied that if MIDINRA was really going to provide these means, they were willing to sow without burning. At the end of the meeting, Antonio complained (once more) that fewer than half of the people had attended. A quick reply from one of the men: "Do you want that the people come? Bring something to distribute! Because it is just a meeting, they are not interested."

15. The same day two meetings were held with farmers from the Mahogany River area close to the place where the river connects with the Escondido River, and with the remote and isolated families located upriver, who had made a special trip to the mouth of the river (a distance of one full day's canoeing) for the meeting. At the first meeting, Antonio asked the group of about 20 if they would be able to control a fire, indicating that the responsibility for burning would be completely that of the farmers and that their common decision would be the rule. He repeated his idea to sow cassava and quequisque, sell these crops on the market, and buy rice. In both meetings, he suggested that they could produce charcoal, but with the warning that they should be very careful. After discussions between the supporters and opponents of burning, in which many of the arguments were brought forward that we have presented in the other accounts, it seemed that in both cases a consensus was reached not to burn. When we left, though, people were still discussing the matter.

16. For a detailed description of the assembly, see Tijerino and Vernooy 1989. Of the 26 hinterland "communities" invited by the UNAG, 22 were present: about 70 people, the majority men. From the side of the government, the following ministries/institutions had sent somebody: MIDINRA, IRENA, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, the National Development Bank, INSSBI, and the regional government in the person of Lumberto Campbell. UNAG was represented by its board of directors and several delegates, including Antonio. The meeting was held in one of the corridors of the San José primary school. The delegates, including UNAG's, sat literally face-to-face with the farmers, the former in a single row, the latter in several rows. To structure the discussion, the UNAG had elaborated a list of issues or problems that was used as a guideline by the three groups to prepare themselves. This list included food, housing, education, health, loans, agriculture, livestock,

charcoal, and lumber.

17. Five days before the general assembly, I walked into the middle of a heated debate between Antonio and George Brooks about what to do about the ongoing burning practices of farmers. Antonio had communicated to Brooks a formal request from a cattle farmer to burn legally 50 *manzanas*. Arguing that 50 *manzanas* more or less did not make a difference compared with the thousands burned already, he tried to get permission from the director of IRENA. Brooks refused. Antonio did not give up, mentioning the idea of the Krisimbila peasants to sow rice in the burned area of the Escondido River. To this he added: "They are putting pressure on me." Brooks did not change his mind.

3. "TODAY WE ARE HERE AND TOMORROW THERE": THE RURAL ECONOMY OF THE HINTERLAND

> Seventy percent of the Nicaraguan population, especially in the rural areas, live in conditions of extreme poverty", said Francesco Vincenti, the permanent representative of the United Nations Development Programme in Nicaragua.
> *La Barricada*, 1 September 1990

Introduction

In Chapter 2, I briefly discussed several aspects of the rural economy of the hinterland. In this chapter, I will present a more detailed analysis of the economy and the ways in which the efforts to make a living are linked with the wider political and socioeconomic context.[1] Historically, as we will see in Part III, the hinterland had developed strong ties with the regional political, administrative, and economic centre, the town of Bluefields. Varying with the ups and downs of the coastal economy this meant direct links with the regional, national, and international market systems through the sale of agricultural products and labour and the purchase of basic commodities.

One of the questions to be dealt with in this chapter concerns the actual forms and significance of the interrelations in these market systems. Here we will focus on the ties seen from the perspective of the hinterland. In Chapter 5, the viewpoint from Bluefields will be documented and analyzed. There we will meet merchants, marketeers, and shop owners involved in regional and supraregional commerce. However, our interest is broader than exchange and market relations. Throughout this book, I emphasize production, including not only material aspects, but also gender, political, and cultural elements that inform and are informed by these processes.

In this chapter, we will look at the particular forms and degrees of commoditization that can be found in the Bluefields hinterland. This includes the extent to which various non-commoditized relations endure (when, where, and under what conditions) and relate to commoditized ones, and the ways in which one might explain this. To do this, I try to find answers to the following questions: How do men and women organize, materially, culturally, and politically, the activities related to production and how are commoditized and non-commoditized relations combined in these processes? What are the recurrent problems in their enterprises and how do they resolve them?

A second issue is the role of the Nicaraguan state and the agrarian reform program in relation to the process of commoditization on the Atlantic Coast and

the transformation of relations of production as imagined by the (former) Sandinist government. The main questions are: What has been the impact of the agrarian reform policy on the production processes and have policy measures contributed to the planned change of relations of production?

To answer these questions, I have divided this chapter into two parts. In the first, I give a general overview of the economy of the hinterland. The second part will offer a more detailed analysis based on three case studies of rural enterprises. In the introductory paragraph to this second part, I will turn to the selection of these cases and the goal I have in mind with their presentation. However, presenting the ethnographic data I will briefly discuss the Nicaraguan variant of the commoditization debate.

Commoditization: the Nicaraguan debate

In Nicaragua, the theoretical discussion about the impact of capitalist relations of production on the rural areas and possible ways to transform them, has taken the form of a debate between two groups. These groups can be placed in the context of a discussion in Latin America between *campesinistas* (derived from the Spanish word *campesino* or peasant) and *decampesinistas* (Blokland 1983; Gianotten and de Wit 1985). In recent years, spokesmen for both sides have played an important role in Nicaragua's national policymaking (Wheelock 1985b; Vernooy 1987; Kaimowitz 1988; Baumeister 1989; Serra 1991).

Followers of the *campesinista* view argue that a dynamic peasant sector continues to persist despite the encroaching powers of capitalism. Based on this observation, they attribute a pivotal role to the peasantry in the transformation of agriculture. The *decampesinistas*, on the contrary, contend that the peasantry is at the point of either being extinguished or transformed into wage-labourers by capitalist forces. Therefore, they expect very little from policies that aim to encourage peasant households to invest in agriculture.

In Nicaragua, however, this debate has focused on only one specific geographical area, the Pacific region which covers about half of the country.[2] No or very little attention has been paid to the coastal rural economy and its producers. Although in terms of population and production levels this tendency is quite understandable, in terms of certain important sociopolitical and ecological issues this one-sidedness can be criticized. In sociopolitical terms, the multi-ethnic population of the Atlantic Coast represents a specific part of Nicaraguan's population and history. As became known internationally, its particular characteristics caused serious political and military problems for the Sandinist government. For example, the Atlantic Coast region was one of the major battlefields of the Contra war. The autonomy project formed the response of the FSLN to these problems.

Ecologically, the coastal region has been and continues to be the agricultural frontier whose expansion contributes to the destruction of precious tropical semihumid and rainforest zones. Within the autonomy process, the use of coastal

land and forest resources remains one of the major issues of dispute (over water and fishing resources a similar debate is fought).

It is precisely for these reasons, in combination with the economic history of the coast, that I consider the questions raised in the commoditization debate to be important. They touch directly or indirectly upon the discussion about alternative economic models for the region that was initiated with the autonomy process (see, for example, Gurdian 1987; Long and Vernooy 1988; Vilas 1990b).[3] At the same time, the debate has primarily focused on economic and political aspects of livelihood, neglecting cultural elements that affect production practices of the people.

During the Sandinist regime, theoretical insights derived from the two perspectives were used to design and legitimize plans and programs, no matter their empirical relevance. The *decampesinistas*, including the leading figures at the ministries responsible for rural development (including Jaime Wheelock) put emphasis on a capital- and technology-based agroindustrial development concentrated on large-scale state enterprises that would guarantee capital accumulation. They also argued for a state-controlled organization of the national and international commercialization — both buying and selling — of food products and agricultural equipment (such as machinery, tools, fertilizers), sustained by a centralized and highly vertical mode of planning. In this development scheme, rural workers were seen as the main social and political force. It was expected that in the long term, small-scale producers would disappear or become labourers themselves.

The *campesinistas* argued for a development policy that would stimulate capital-extensive and labour-intensive family enterprises producing products for both export and the internal market. Peasant values, adaptations, and innovations were considered positively. State planning should be decentralized and based on the participation of (organized) peasant families.

In practice, the *decampesinista* view formed the cornerstone of Sandinist agrarian policy although *campesinista* elements played an important role at certain stages and in some policy issues, e.g., in the land-reform measures that favoured small and medium-scale producers. Adjustments of the policy in the pro-peasant line were made due to several factors among which was the enduring economic crisis, the Contra war, and the political pressure exercised by organized farmers backed by their union, the UNAG. These factors continue to influence present-day discussions, although the UNO government seems determined to push forward a strong capitalist-oriented agriculture based on the principles of private enterprise, economic efficiency, and a minimum support from the state.

General features of the hinterland economy

One of the main features of the economy of the hinterland is that, during the last ten years, economic activities have not had the chance to develop normally and in tranquillity, i.e., without the dramatic impact of disturbing political, military, and natural forces.[4] The Contra war had many perturbing effects in the region. One of

the most important of these was the forced displacement or migration of thousands of households to new areas, a movement that gave rise to many new social problems. On top of the war, came the devastating effects of hurricane Joan, whose impact I discussed at length in Chapter 2. Finally, the economic crisis at the national level continues to influence negatively the coastal economy, especially, because of its historical "underdevelopment" in terms of productive forces, communication, and state services (see Part III).

Another factor of great importance that conditions economic activities in the region concerns the ecological characteristics of the (humid) tropical rainforest. Rainfall, soils, flora, and fauna typical of this kind of rainforest set the limits for agricultural practices and their (long-term) results in terms of output and sustained development. It is important to observe, however, that these limits are not established once and for all. They are rather continuously tested and redefined by practices, a process that in its turn reshapes the ecology of the rainforest.

In fact, the idea that there are completely "untouched" rainforests is more and more being questioned. Even in the remotest areas of the Amazonian tropical rainforests, Indians — over hundreds of years — have modified the system by practising agriculture, using trees and fruit, and hunting wildlife, i.e., by managing in one way or another the environment and thus reshaping the forest.[5] In some cases these practices threaten the future of the forest.[6] Although some of the negative effects caused by cultivation in tropical forest ecosystems are directly visible (e.g., deforestation), others differ considerably according to local (zonal) circumstances.

The interplay of the abovementioned factors (war, ecology, economic crisis) has resulted in a generalized poverty among the majority of rural households in the area. During my first visits, I was confronted with the expressions of this: poor living conditions, high levels of subnutrition, diseases, and illiteracy.[7]

During all our trips to the hinterland, we observed on the rivers and creeks a continuous movement of *cayucos* and *doris*. In these small canoe-type boats, people transport animals and produce, including crops, lumber, firewood, and charcoal, in the direction of Bluefields; and basic commodities, such as cooking oil, salt, kerosene, and matches, which are heading for the hinterland. The high mobility of people and their domestic animals — "today we are here and tomorrow there" in the words of a farmer — is the predominant response to the three general features outlined above. This mobility clearly demonstrates the lack of stability in and the vulnerability of the area. At the same time, however, we can consider this mobility as an active adaptation of men and women to the uncertainties and continuous changes that take place in their environment. This adaptation, which in everyday life has many concrete forms and degrees of success, is central to the mode of survival of the coastal people.

With the exception of the cooperatives and so-called *terrenos nacionales* (land belonging to the patrimony of the state), land in the hinterland is owned individually. In general, farm size is large, ranging from 60 to more than 200 ha. As we will see in the case studies, frequently farmlands encompass forest and/or

swamps. Farmers may possess either a "royal land title" issued during the Somoza regime or a "land-reform title" obtained from the former FSLN government.

Looking at the kinds of productive activities among the rural enterprises we can classify them broadly in three categories.

- A small number of enterprises dedicate themselves to agriculture only, producing for subsistence and selling small amounts on the market. Using slash-and-burn techniques these enterprises cultivate small parcels of corn, beans, rice, roots and tubers, musaceae, and in most cases a variety of other crops such as pineapple, sugarcane, coconut, and breadfruit.
- A second category comprises enterprises that combine (subsistence) agriculture with the production of charcoal. Charcoal has become one of the principal goods produced in the hinterland economy. For some enterprises in this category, charcoal production represents the main economic activity during several months of the year. With the income generated by its sale, people buy a significant portion of their basic foodstuffs.
- The combination of livestock, producing milk and meat for subsistence or as commodities, and (subsistence) agriculture is the third alternative, which in some cases is complemented by charcoal production. Among the enterprises with cattle, a small number of farmers can be found whose main activity is the trade of cattle and sale of beef. Most of these enterprises are close to Bluefields and their owners reside in town. This provides relatively easy access to the market. These enterprises occupy a particular place within the hinterland economy as they offer the possibility of accumulating considerable amounts of capital.

In addition to these productive activities, people hunt, fish, produce firewood, and cut lumber which in varying degrees contribute to the growth of the enterprises.

Production levels of the most important crops, i.e., corn, rice, beans, cassava/sweet manioc, and quequisque, are relatively low given the ecological and technical conditions. With the exception of farmers who sell beef, milk, lumber, and/or charcoal in relatively large quantities, accumulation of capital is not very significant. Crops and goods sold on the market generate income that is generally used to buy commodities that are not produced on the farm. According to most farmers, the area soils do not suit agriculture, an opinion confirmed by the specialists of the regional institutions involved in rural development, whom we met in the previous chapter. However, within the hinterland, some sites are more suitable for agriculture than others, causing people to keep searching for the best location to cultivate. Diversification of crops and varieties is one of the most common solutions for the problem of low production levels.

Plant and animal production generally takes place at the farm level, independent from (state) institutions or money/market mechanisms. People frequently exchange production materials with neighbours and friends; in some cases seeds, plants, and information travel large distances surpassing regional and even national borders! During our fieldwork, we met farmers who were engaged in

experimenting with plants, trees, and grasses. They use specific, local techniques, such as grafting in the case of fruit trees, in an attempt to find practices better suited to the ecological conditions of the region.

We can, therefore, assume that trial and error have formed and still constitute an integral part of farming practices on the Atlantic Coast. Coastal farmers have accumulated a stock of skills, knowledge, and experience that guarantees them a minimum degree of security. Unfortunately, so far very little is known about this locally generated expertise and the social and knowledge networks linked with it. Some farmers buy improved varieties of basic grains. As the case studies will demonstrate, farmers cultivate more than one variety of most crops, thus reducing the risk of loss to plagues, which are frequent in the area.

The common practice is clearing the forest with axe and machete in the dry season, then burning the remaining cover shortly before the first rains fall. Planting is done without removing the debris; seeds are sown in holes dug with a planting stick. Weeding is done manually. After one or two harvests, the fields are abandoned and a new parcel of forest is cleared. In general, this practice results in production levels that are hardly sufficient to satisfy subsistence needs. Fields are abandoned because of reduced soil fertility, increasing problems of weed control, soil erosion, and high incidence of plagues and diseases. According to the men and women whom we met during the research, these techniques have changed very little over the years.

Enterprises generally comprise a single household, in some cases an extended household including grandparents or brothers and sisters and their offspring. The organization of labour is based on intra- and interfamily relations, friendship, and *compadrazgo*, in most cases based on non-monetary agreements through the *mano vuelta* system. An exception on this are the *mandadores* (managers) and a small number of *mozos* (paid workers) who are employed on the farms of livestock holders, most of whom can be found in the vicinity of Bluefields. Another exception is the members of the cocopalm cooperative in the settlement of San Mariano, who until recently received a wage from the Bluefields-based cocopalm enterprise, based on their work on the plantation. I discuss the particulars of these worker-peasants in one of the case studies that follow.

Women and children play an important role in the organization of labour. In fact, as in other regions of Nicaragua (CIERA 1989), women work on average more hours a day and are involved in more tasks than men. Some enterprises are managed by single-parent households headed by women and their children.

Access to credit, provided by the state through the National Development Bank, is very restricted and confined to private farmers growing basic grains or raising small numbers of cattle and cooperatives of Kukra Hill and San Mariano, which produce African palm oil and cocopalm. No credit has been available for the introduction of non-traditional crops appropriate to the region or for forestry/agroforestry initiatives. The bank office in Bluefields strictly follows national policies that do not take into account the ecological and socioeconomic peculiarities of the region. For example, in 1989 credit was provided for agriculture

and livestock as the Bluefields office followed national policy. For 1990, the focus was on livestock. In the Bluefields region, financing for the purchase of 375 cows was approved by a credit committee with representatives of MIDINRA, UNAG, farmers, and the bank. Edgar Vaquedano, the head of MIDINRA's agrarian reform department (see Chapter 2), justified the policy as follows: "These new plans show that we are adjusting to the new reality in the region. We simply do not have another answer to give to the peasantry than financing livestock. However, this measure is palliative. And while there is no financing for reforestation... this is our solution." The pressure from UNAG to provide credit finally met with success. The union argued that livestock development was the only viable short-term economic solution for the Bluefields area. Later, other alternatives such as agroforestry projects could be developed. I will return to this in the second case study.

All enterprises maintain some relation with the regional market where surpluses are sold and products brought. However, in most cases these relations are of a very fluctuating character, depending on the season, the kind of product(s) to be sold, results of harvest, demand and prices, availability of transport, and, last but not least, the social networks in which the members of the household are enmeshed. As the case studies show, interactions with the market are highly diversified. We encounter households that sell their products to market vendors; directly to consumers on the wharf, in the streets (mobile style), and/or at home; to family members and friends; to merchants (retailers); and/or to enterprises such as ENABAS, a state organization that buys and sells basic grains, or to ECODEPA.[8] In most cases, prices are negotiated locally between buyers and sellers, except for transactions with ENABAS and ECODEPA. These enterprises generally follow a nationally defined price policy.

Overall, the amount of produce sold by men, women, and children is relatively small, a few quintals of basic grains, a few bunches of bananas, some bags of roots or oranges. Moreover, sales follow an irregular cycle through the year. As a farmer explained: "The *campesino* is used to having money one day and not having it for the next week or two or three. That is his **style of survival** in the countryside" (my emphasis). The exception to this is the trade in cattle and meat bought in the Fifth Region (Boaco-Chontales) and in the area of El Tortuguero and sold in Bluefields — a highly lucrative business for the few men involved.

Apart from the difficulties caused by living and working in a tropical rainforest area, the people of the hinterland have to face other problems that constrain their economic activities. Among them are lack of transport, communication, storage and processing facilities, and the absence of a consistent agrarian policy that stimulates alternative and viable economic activities. Although many of these problems can also be found in other regions, the specific historical and geographical context of the coast make their burden there heavier. Other problems are cattle stealing in the area of Bluefields, which especially since October 1990 has become a serious problem; over a short time, sixteen cases were reported in Kukra Hill, Caño Negro, Esconfram, and Musilayna Creek. This has led to illegal sales of meat in Bluefields, contributing to the boom in small-scale commercial activities (see Chapter 5).

Introduction to the three case studies of rural enterprises

In the following sections, I present in some detail the stories of three enterprises from different locations in the study area.[9] Two were selected because they are "typical," i.e., they represent the majority of enterprises: agriculture combined with charcoal production; and livestock plus agriculture. Hence, this excludes "atypical" units, involved only in agriculture, and units organized around livestock as their principal activity. These two cases also meet a second criterion that was engendered by the analysis presented in Chapter 2 and first part of this chapter: the wish to consider certain key questions related to the commoditization debate. These questions are the viability of agriculture in the tropical rainforest of the area and the problem of deforestation; and the role of political struggle and organization on the part of farmers through the UNAG.

To study another key question, the impact of the agrarian reform policies through the creation of cooperatives and agroindustrial complexes, a third case was selected. This enterprise is "atypical" as it represents a household that is dedicated to agriculture only and work on a plantation (as a member of a cooperative). With these cases, I attempt to show the diversified ways in which economic activities, political struggles, and cultural meanings unfold on a day-to-day basis. Furthermore, analyzing the viewpoints of the men and women involved in livelihood issues reveals the different purposes and meanings that the methods of organization have for the people resolving their livelihood problems.

As will become clear, the three cases also illustrate other key questions that people in the hinterland face in everyday life — questions that relate to the division of the unit between town and countryside, conflicts between parents and children and between men and women, and the implementation of development projects. It is important to note, however, that these questions emerged during the fieldwork as a result of events in the lives of the people and as a result of the interaction between them and the researchers. Hence, the presentation in the following pages should be seen as the result of the interplay of these predefined criteria and emerging issues that aroused our interest. In other words, instead of being products based on standard and straightforward ethnographic cookbook recipes, they are the outcome of a procedure in new ingredients were continuously added and in which the researchers were not the only cooks, although they certainly guided the work.

Angela and Guillermo: bridging the urban-rural divide

The first case study is about a mestizo family consisting, at least at the start of the research, of sixteen members, two parents and fourteen children.[10] This family owns a farm on the northern shore of Caño Negro, about 30 km northwest of Bluefields. Guillermo, 48 years old, and Angela, 46, are both children of farmer families from the Kukra River area. They married in 1966 and moved to Caño Negro. In 1991, three adult children left the household to start a life of their own. The remaining household is still larger than the average size for the region, which

we calculated to be seven persons. Although their needs are higher than average, the family's potential labour force is also large.

Their farm can be reached by river, a trip that takes 45 minutes in a regular speedboat or six to seven hours by canoe. Apart from the farm, the family also owns a small house in Bluefields, where some member of the household live and work. Guillermo is a quiet, friendly man, dedicated to his work on the farm. He is convinced that he would not be able to stand city life where it is hard to find a job and where he says salaries are low, although his children keep trying to convince him to leave the farm and move to Bluefields.

Angela is best characterized by her high level of activity as she moves continuously around house carrying out small-scale commercial activities and caring for the children. She begins her many tasks at 0500 and only stops at 2100 or 2200, even on weekends! On the rare occasions that she found time to visit with us, she enjoyed talking about the births and growing-up experiences of her children, which she does with an eye for detail. This is in contrast with her husband who does not even remember all the birthdays of his offspring. One evening, Angela told us that at the baptism of one of their children, Guillermo got confused about the name they had given to the girl, but fortunately she was quick enough to help him out.

One of the most striking features of the enterprise run by this family concerns the ingenuous way in which they have adapted to the ecological conditions of the hinterland and to the changing circumstances caused by political and military upheaval. During their life, Angela and Guillermo have built up 25 years of farming experience using an annual cycle of different economic activities, both agricultural and non-agricultural.

A second central trait of the enterprise has to do with the way in which the family has dealt with the effects of the Contra war. In 1985, a Contra attack forced the household to move to Bluefields temporarily for safety. For the majority of household members, however, this stay in town became permanent leading to the division of the household into two segments: father and oldest son on the farm, mother, younger sons, and daughters in the city looking for a new way of life. This change has given rise to new options and problems, as I will discuss below.

Regarding hurricane Joan, the family has overcome its disastrous impact above all through hard work based on experience and craftsmanship, which together with a modest way of life, continue to be the basis for survival and relative success. Before paying more attention to how they organize their work and lives, I will sketch some of the changes that have taken place in Caño Negro, the "community" where the farm is located.[11]

Like most of the region around Bluefields, the Caño Negro area was originally occupied by creole farmers. The first family to become established was called Pitry, a name that was later integrated in the name Caño Negro de Pitry to distinguish the creek from other black water creeks in the region. We do not have an exact date for the initial settlement, but probably around 1880 a small number of creole families settled on the creek's shores. Agriculture was subsistence level. People produced small amounts of plantains, cassava, and quequisque. They also fished and sold coconuts in Bluefields (the latter constituting the main commodity in the area).

With the arrival of mestizo families from Chontales in the 1960s, agriculture became more diversified and crops, such as corn, beans, and bananas of different varieties, were introduced. Simultaneously, slash-and-burn practices, previously unknown, were introduced permitting the occupation of larger parcels of land. The mestizo families began to produce charcoal that would become one of the main commodities of the local economy, replacing the coconut of the creole farmers. Thus agricultural practices with roots in the Pacific region — crops, working styles, food preferences — were adopted locally, while the new colonizers picked up the methods that already existed on the coast.

According to Ernesto Hodgson, a creole native of the creek and vice-president of UNAG-Bluefields, in 1965 most of the creole families had sold their properties. He said that this was due to discrimination against the creoles by the mestizo families, who in that period already outnumbered the original settlers. I have not been able to confirm this explanation. During the same period, various Catholic priests from the USA played an important role in the social organization in the area as they contributed to the building of a chapel, distributed donations, and formed youth groups of which Guillermo was a member.

It was only in the 1970s that cattle production was introduced in the area, first on two farms, later slowly expanding to neighbouring enterprises. The introduction of cattle over the years caused the deforestation of relatively large parcels, mostly located along the river shores. This contributed to the expansion of what can be called the agriculture frontier at the local level. It expanded upstream with the establishment of new farms and in the direction of the *monte* (north and south) opening up new parcels within the boundaries of each farm.

In 1978, twelve farmers organized a pressure group to demand redistribution of an abandoned banana plantation of about 1300 ha situated downstream. This plantation was occupied at the end of the 1960s by the Standard Fruit Company. However, due to inadequate use of fertilizers, most of the plants were unproductive causing great losses to the company and to the farmers who had followed the example of planting bananas. Shortly afterward, the company sold the plantation to a state institute created by the Somozas (Instituto Nacional de Fomento, INFONAC), which in turn sold the area to its administrator Mr Patterson in an obscure deal whose arrangements could not be reconstructed. Patterson abandoned the area, renting only a few small parcels to farmers who had settled on the river.

After the revolutionary triumph, these farmers formed one of the first cooperatives in the region. However, its militant members, among them Ernesto Hodgson, were soon selected to occupy posts in the newly created regional units of the Union of Rural Workers (ATC), UNAG, and the Ministry of Health. This led to the disintegration of the cooperative.

After 1979, the Contra war caused one of the most significant events in the community. In 1985, a group of Contras attacked the cooperative and killed five of its leaders, all members of the FSLN and UNAG. After the onslaught, the Sandinist regional military leaders decided to evacuate all families in the Caño Negro area, because of the threat of other attacks. The families, among them Angela and Guillermo, moved to Bluefields waiting for safer and quieter times.

As in the case of most people who joined the Contras, the members of this group were mostly young men of families in the region. In fact, the local people did not call them Contras but "*los hombres del monte*," "the bush people," or even "*los primos*" (the cousins). They were acquaintances, friends, or family members who had left the communities to fight in the mountains or the bush. The significance of their ties was important as, in many cases, families were split into two camps. Guillermo gave us an insight into the complexities of the Nicaraguan civil war at the local level and its impact on everyday life that goes much further than the "good guys" versus "bad guys" images we are so used to receiving through international media. As Guillermo told us:

> In those days, the men of the *monte* were in love with my daughters. It was on a Friday that they attacked here. On Saturday they came after me. Angela arrived and told me "get ready, they are coming to carry you away." But I stayed, I didn't go anywhere. We stayed all alone here, left behind.... These men were from Kukra River. They used to pass back and forth, not far from here. But they knew me very well. They could not enter here because there are many swamps. In Kukra River it is much easier to get away.

This account was immediately followed by a story about an experience with the Sandinist army, recruiting troops. One day it was Roberto's turn, their oldest son.

> They grabbed Roberto when he was about sixteen years. They trained him for one month and then carried him to the mountains. He was very sad because he was very close to us. Then, one night, he escaped. It was three o'clock in the night. He got away with two other boys. He came to the farm and here they did not look for him. Until the time came that they did not longer recruit people.... I got my training here at the creek. I was ready to go to Juigalpa. But Angela did not like it and asked me "who is going to feed our children?" They let me stay. Only a few from here left.

Andar en el monte: the farm enterprise

The farm covers an area of approximately 90 *manzanas* or 63 ha which is about the average farm size in the region. One kilometre up river, one finds a place called "the chapel," which is considered to be the centre of the community. At this site, where a small church stood before the hurricane, the people meet occasionally to talk about community matters, attend a religious ceremony, or play baseball. In a kind of open-air classroom, a small group of children attend primary school. In the same facility political meetings are held. From the chapel, one can travel to Bluefields by land, a trip that takes between four and five hours walking. During the dry season Guillermo and Roberto make use of this path about once every two weeks.

The family possesses a "royal land title," which was extended during the Somoza regime and later acknowledged by the Sandinist government. When the family first

occupied the farm, the land had been abandoned for about seven years by the former owner, a woman who lived in Bluefields. From the creek, the land extends toward the Escondido River over a small hill. On the east and north sides, it is bordered by swamps; on the west, an abandoned coco plantation can be found that is now used as pasture by a neighbour.

The farm house is small and built with lumber and sheets of zinc. It is made up of one sleeping room, a storage room, and an open-air "kitchen." Rebuilt after the hurricane, it hardly provides the basic conditions for a permanent occupation, which is willingly admitted by Angela who does not like the house at all. She finds it too dark and small. The house is surrounded by a yard occupied by dogs, cats, chicken, ducks, and pigs. A number of fruit trees and other crops are cultivated in the yard: guayaba, lemon, kalala, coconut, pejibaye, breadfruit, pineapple, papaya, and sugarcane. A well, a small open-air storage shed, and an artisanal mill for processing sugarcane are located here. The yard is also the place where the family eats and where they receive visitors. Where the yard ends, the so-called *monte* begins. This area covers practically all the rest of the farmland including the different parcels for crops, virgin land, abandoned fields, and the swampy areas.

Andar en el monte or being in the hills is the equivalent of being at work: planting, weeding, harvesting, making charcoal, or hunting. As Guillermo explains, *andar en el monte* represents a way of life: "In the *monte* one cannot walk *de vago* [hang around]. Life in the monte means working."

As I mentioned before, the enterprise, in operation for seven years, is divided into two subunits. Agriculture is in the hands of Guillermo and Roberto, who in practice is his father's partner.[12] Occasionally the other children provide a helping hand on the farm. Father and son travel in turns to Bluefields about once a week to bring foodstuffs or other products from the farm, to carry goods to the farm, and to keep in touch with the rest of the family and its affairs. For Roberto, the visits to Bluefields are also an opportunity to drink rum in large quantities, an escape from the hard and rather monotonous rhythm of farm life.

Angela, her daughters, and other sons dedicate themselves to various non-agricultural economic activities in town. Only on rare occasions do they visit the farm, when their help is requested by Guillermo or during holidays. For the younger children, born or growing up in Bluefields, going to the farm has become a special event to which they look forward for days in advance. Jumping into the creek is the most pleasant moment in such journeys.

Normally, all the farm work is done by Guillermo and Roberto, from clearing the land to sowing and harvesting. In peak periods, mostly during harvest time, some of the other children help out. This was especially the case during the two crop cycles after the hurricane of 1988 when labour requirements were larger than normal because of the chaos left behind by the storm. Guillermo called on his older daughters to come to the farm and do basic household work, cooking, cleaning, and washing, for which he did not have time himself. Father and son usually do this work themselves.

As a routine, they do not hire external labour nor do they work elsewhere as salaried labourers. Once Guillermo hired a worker to help him clear a parcel of

land. However, this was not a success. "A worker does not work like the owner of the farm. The worker is interested in obtaining his daily salary. He did not deliver the work *limpio, limpio, limpio* [clean; good] like I do."

On some occasions, however, they help neighbours or friends, according to their conscience, as Guillermo told us. They do this work on a non-monetary basis; one favour is exchanged for another (*mano-vuelta*). Usually labour is repaid with labour, but sometimes part of the harvest or lumber is given instead. In this case, the value of the labour is based on the wage they would pay a hired worker.[13] In the past, first with his godfather Paulino and later with three friends, Guillermo established what he calls a *sociedad* or partnership to cut and sell lumber. In the latter case, the four men sold lumber in Bluefields and to the PROMAR fishing company of Corn Island through an intermediary. This was an profitable economic activity, according to Guillermo. However, when his saw broke down, his partners did not want to share the cost of repairs, which led to the disintegration of the team.

Paulino plays an important role in the life of the family. Until 1988, he occupied a neighbouring farm, but sold it just before the Sandinists changed the money in February that year. Actually, Paulino lives in Bluefields where he has a stand in the market. Of all the godfathers, Paulino has helped the family the most in agricultural and other tasks on the farm. In fact, *compadrazgo* relations are more important than ties with brothers or sisters. Neither Angela nor Guillermo maintain close contacts with family members.

The labour requirements on the farm are sometimes a source of conflict between father and son on the one hand and between Angela and other children, on the other hand. These conflicts reveal the critical and sometimes fragile ways in which resources, in this case labour, are mobilized. In February 1990, the children said that they wanted to go to school, i.e., they did not want to be called to work on the farm. For Guillermo, this was bad news because he was in need for their help. However, Angela had the last word. She said that they should go to school, because later on they would support their parents. As Guillermo remarked, "You see, mother wins..."

Another conflict over the need for help on the farm was generated at the end of the same year when one of the daughters went to the farm to cook, clean, and wash for about six weeks. When, after ten weeks, her father did not want to let her return to Bluefields, she burst into tears saying that she would not speak to him any more. The harsh living conditions on the farm, the loneliness, and the boredom are burdens for the children who are now used to life in town with friends, radio, and television around them.

What started as a temporary move to the city because of the Contra war, has resulted in major, long-term, and often unforeseen consequences for parents, children, and their social relations. The transfer of part of the household to town is a clear threat to the reciprocal ties within the enterprise **and** to the ways in which parents, in this case Guillermo, work and live. At stake is not only labour but culture and ideology as well. In situations of crisis, as I described above, the ties are maintained and values defended, at least temporarily, through a return to patriarchal norms and the asymmetric gender relations.

Agricultural practices

During the first year on the farm, Guillermo and Angela planted five basic crops: corn, plantain, cassava, coconut, and quequisque. They received the basic knowledge about how to plant these crops from their parents. In the case of Guillermo, however, his father was not very demanding when it came to craftsmanship: there is a sharp contrast between him and Roberto whom he appreciates as a very good worker and who is becoming a skilled farmer. At first, they used to plant about two *manzanas* of corn and one of beans. If 15 quintals of the latter were harvested, they would keep 3 for their own consumption and sell the rest. When they had their first children, a larger portion was kept for household consumption. These crops, together with rice and beans, form the major ingredients of coastal cooking in creole, mestizo, and miskito traditions alike.

To cultivate these crops, Guillermo and Roberto use the slash and burn method, clearing small parcels of forest in a two to three year sequence. They work mainly on *tierra pesada* or "heavy" soils, i.e., land that has not been previously cultivated. Guillermo explained to us that productivity on *tacotales* or parcels that lie fallow for one or a few years and are covered with weeds, bushes, and small trees is too low to permit cultivation. Thus they have practised and continue practising a rotating agriculture within the boundaries of the farm. They have managed to do this in a relatively sustained way, taking into account natural regeneration and without destroying all the forest resources on the land. This implies long-term planning soil use and production, which they have managed rather successfully.

Burning in preparation for sowing in the first cultivation period in May (*primera*) is considered to be the critical factor for success (plagues or natural disasters excluded). Guillermo is convinced that only when one burns the field — he learned the practice from his godfather Paulino — will one be able to sow without the risk of bad harvests. If you do not burn, "you will also get a harvest, but only enough to eat." That is to say, no surplus is produced that could be sold at the market. This is a major disadvantage that is usually not calculated in the family's production plans, as can be concluded from the remark by Guillermo.

In the case of rice, another main staple, burning is an absolute prerequisite for even a minimum harvest. Guillermo is aware of the effects of burning — it destroys the vegetative material that covers the soil (leaves and mulch) and acts as a natural fertilizer. However, he argues, it prevents plagues and gives higher yields, two important advantages. Moreover, he only burns very small parcels for cultivation of crops. When asked if during the 25 years of being a farmer, agriculture had changed, he answered us that the work is still the same, the basic tasks being the sowing of corn, beans, cassava, and plantain.

In the following section we will look at the different production activities on the farm in more detail, concentrating on the period from the second crop (*postrera*) of 1989 to the *primera* of 1991. Like other producers in the region, the family lost the *postrera* harvest of 1988 to Joan. The sowing of the *primera* of 1989 turned out to be very difficult, as we have seen in Chapter 2. Only at the end of 1989, could

one speak of a more-or-less normal situation, although many things could go wrong, as Guillermo repeatedly explained to us, because the longer term effects of the hurricane are unpredictable. In October 1989, they sowed one and a half *manzanas* of corn, which produced three and a half quintals, far below the estimated 20 quintals. Half a *manzana* was eaten by ants. Guillermo attributed the poor crop to poor soil quality or the seeds may have been spoiled by the hurricane. In December, three-quarters of a *manzana* of beans were sown and produced two and a half quintals at harvest time in April 1990. The year before the hurricane, they had harvested seven quintals from one *manzana* and, in excellent years, they had had harvests of sixteen quintals per *manzana*.

Originally, when they saw the poor state of the crop, they thought they might not harvest at all. However, Guillermo changed his mind because, as he pointed out with a smile, he did not want to appear to be a lazy person. Of the two and a half quintal harvest, one was kept for seed for the next cycle, which is a common practice. Sowing beans requires special attention from the very beginning: "Sowing starts when the new moon has eight days, never when it is new moon, because this will affect the beans. First, we realize a tryout sowing only a small piece in order to see how the beans sprout. If you do not do this, you can lose everything!" Furthermore, beans are never sown in burned soils. Hence, the bean harvest also turned out to be bad.

Like most of the farmers in the region, Guillermo and his family grow different varieties of basic grains to reduce the risk of destruction by plagues and to meet the demands of consumers in Bluefields. They sow three varieties of corn: "yellow," which has a good taste, but does not sell well because the people do not like the color; "white," which is the favourite variety for preparing *nacatamales* as they become slightly rose when cooked; and "forty days," a fast-growing variety of high quality, but for which it is very hard to obtain seeds. Apart from these varieties, we found plants that are a mixture of "yellow" and "white," probably due to local experiments.

They use two varieties of beans: dark red and one that is red with a white outer coat. A third fast-growing and improved variety, called "40 days," was not available in Bluefields after the hurricane. They also planted about one *manzana* of sweet manioc and half a *manzana* of quequisque in combination with two varieties of local yams that regularly produced a good harvest. From the few banana and plantain trees that survived the hurricane, fruits for family consumption were harvested in April. In addition to these traditional crops, they also planted some pinda and a new variety of green beans. Within the month, Guillermo proudly showed us the results of these experiments.

Six months later, in October 1990, the vegetation on the farm had grown considerably. Nature was recouping what it had lost in the hurricane. From September on, father and son had been very busy harvesting the crops of the *primera* and preparing the soils for the *postrera*. The corn harvest was better this time, which made them decide to sell some on the market in Bluefields, especially the young corn ears for which for a short time a large demand existed. Different

varieties of musaceae (plantain, "square bananas," "Costa Rican" bananas and "Philippine" bananas) had reached an age of six months, and would be harvested in May 1991.

For the *postrera*, the family planned to sow, three times, one *manzana* of corn, both yellow and white varieties (with seeds from the last harvest) in so-far uncultivated land. Slashing for this parcel was an exhausting job as vegetation was thick, mosquitos were aggressive, and poisonous snakes were hiding in the foliage. They would sow after 10 November, a fixed date established by Guillermo based on his experience. Sowing before that would give bad results.

They had already planted one-eighth of a *manzana* of beans in another unused area that they planned to extend if they could obtain more seeds. Unfortunately, the young bean plants were attacked by a ferocious ant, an eternal enemy of agricultural cultivation in the region (corn plants are also on its menu). Finally, they planted another five-eights of a *manzana* of beans at the beginning of January 1991, mixing two varieties in the same parcel: "If one doesn't produce, the other will," Guillermo explained.

They were able to obtain the bean seeds with credit from the National Development Bank in Bluefields. Although they received the loan in "old" cordobas, they would have to pay it back in new or "gold" cordobas, including inflation rates. Like most Nicaraguans, they did not completely understand the implications of the change in currency and only after buying the seeds did they become aware of the fact that the bank would calculate inflation on the loan. In spite of this unforeseen problem, they expected to be able to pay back the loan.

For February 1991, they planned to prepare the soil for one *manzana* of sweet manioc each (8000 plants per *manzana*) in combination with quequisque. First the land was cleared manually, then the manioc was planted using a stick followed by a rapid burning of the parcel to clear it a second time. They cultivate manioc and quequisque to sell the surplus on the market in Bluefields. For both crops, demand is consistent and, although prices are low, harvests are usually abundant.

Another goal was to plant three *manzanas* of plantains and bananas on an area that they slashed and burned in March. The idea to plant musaceae was motivated by the relatively low prices for corn and beans. They expected that plantains and bananas would be more profitable the coming year. In the end, they burned about five *manzanas* in April and May for the *primera* of 1991. Before burning, they cut the precious lumber trees, mainly laurel. The trees on the ground, a result of the hurricane, that caught fire during the burning were saved by throwing water on them. This second or third class lumber, they used to make posts for fencing.

Reflecting on the situation on the farm and in the countryside in general one and a half year after the hurricane, Guillermo told us that, little by little, they were returning to normal. They had much more time to work in the fields than the previous year when they had to deal with the effects of Joan, cook, and clean; now with Miranda on the farm (one of the older daughters), things were much easier. Moreover, he observed that market prices for agricultural products were better than before, although at the same time he was aware that prices of other basic products had also risen.

Father and son do not only grow crops. They also produce charcoal, which is one of the most important commodities produced at the farm, cut lumber, breed pigs and chicken, and fish and hunt. Guillermo learned how to make charcoal from his compadre Paulino and he is passing the knowledge on to Roberto. To fabricate charcoal efficiently requires specific experience and knowledge. One must know the characteristics and qualities of the different lumber species that can be used, the chemical composition of the soil where the oven is constructed (as a rule, where the soil is good for charcoal it is bad for agriculture and vice versa), and the construction techniques for piling up the wood, lighting the oven, and making the charcoal, which requires daily monitoring (one puts earth on the oven to slow down the burning process).

This practice is an art in itself, but, once mastered, considerable profits can be made. From each "oven" one can produce 50 bags of charcoal and it is possible to construct four to six ovens during the dry season. Charcoal is also produced during the rainy season, but then the process takes much longer and results are not as good. An advantage of producing charcoal during the wet season, however, is that the risk of forest fires (see Chapter 2) is almost zero.

The family uses a small portion of the charcoal for their own needs, but most is sold on the market in Bluefields. This brings in a significant percentage of the household's income, especially during the dry season, although there is always uncertainty about prices, which depend on demand and supply. For example, during the summer of 1989, they produced a large amount of charcoal. However, prices were very low. After the hurricane, because of the enormous number of fallen trees and the problems involved in farming, most farmers turned to charcoal production as a way to obtain income in a relatively short time. One year later, in the summer of 1990, father and son produced far less charcoal, although market prices had risen considerably.

They also cut firewood, which they use themselves and sell in the neighbourhood of their house in town. After their electric saw broke down, they did not cut lumber, although Guillermo was planning to repair the machine so as to return to this activity.

In January 1990, Guillermo applied for a loan to buy ten calves. Before the problems with the Contras, the family had always had a small number of cows to milk and to sell for meat as a secondary goal. However, the bank did not approve the application, because the farm did not have the necessary amount of pasture which is defined by the institution as one *manzana* for each animal. Hence, the reintegration of cattle on the farm remains a plan that might be realized in the near future.

Hunting and fishing are important activities on the farm, not only economically — the provision of meat and leather — but also socially, as a form of recreation and a way of reinforcing relations with friends and neighbours. On many occasions, Guillermo told us long stories of hunting experiences. However, hurricane Joan dramatically affected the wildlife in the region and, according to most farmers, it had not recovered.

The small-scale commerce of Angela and her children

Economic activity of the farm enterprise is complemented by Angela and the other children, who since 1986 have lived in Bluefields, in the "19th of July" neighbourhood. For several months in 1990, they maintained a "*ventecita*" or small shop (in practice this was not more than a table) in their house, selling to neighbours produce from the farm and other basic goods purchased in town, such as onions, tamarindo, and cigarettes. When the rainy season started, they discontinued this activity.

Daily in the late afternoon, except Sundays, two of the girls used to sell bread on the corner of one of the main streets of the town. This bread was bought from a bakery. The goal was to sell 50 loafs a day, which, however, turned out to be rather difficult due to fierce competition and a relatively small demand because, for many people, bread is a luxury. Also, on holidays, the people of Bluefields buy less bread.

Resale prices are established by the group of women that dominates this economic activity in Bluefields; according to Angela, agreements are easily reached. A major problem was caused by the change of government on 25 April 1990, when retail prices went up 100%. For the women, this meant that from one day to the other they needed twice as much money to buy their regular number of loafs. Although Angela managed to overcome this problem at first, she decided to stop selling bread a few weeks later because of a considerable drop in demand: "It is very expensive to buy bread and it doesn't give us any profits."

On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, Angela and her daughters sell homemade *nacatamales* (a kind of cornmeal roll filled with meat and spices and covered in banana leaves) on the corner of the street that leads to the central market, the busiest spot in town. The ingredients for the *nacatamales* come partly from the farm (corn, banana leaves, and sometimes pig meat) and partly from the market (meat and spices). This activity, which was their first enterprise when they arrived in Bluefields, has turned out to be the most reliable way of securing a weekly income.

In the evening of the same days, they work at another small-scale business: selling homemade food in the form of popular snacks in front of one of the city's most popular discotheques in the centre of town. This is the most lucrative activity, despite the long hours Angela has to spend preparing the food, carrying table, pots, and pans to the site and back home, and selling the snacks. On weekends when people have just received their salaries — twice a month in Nicaragua — sales are especially good.

A few times a year, they are also going to sell snacks at popular festivities in town. One Saturday evening in July 1991, their business outside the disco was rudely interrupted when a knife fight broke out; Angela's belongings and snacks were scattered all over the street. Intimidated by this incident, she decided to stop her activity at this place, temporarily, which affected household income considerably.

When asked if she would like to return to the farm, Angela answered without hesitation: "I do not want to go back, because I have become used to life in town.

We live more than six years in Bluefields. Maybe with a few cows the farm would be more pleasant and when we were having coconuts it was also nicer than right now." In other words, as much as *andar en el monte* implies a particular way of life for Guillermo, *andar en la ciudad* or living in town has become a way of life for Angela and her daughters.

To conclude this case study, I will briefly consider the participation of the family in social and political affairs. Guillermo and Roberto go to almost every meeting held in Caño Negro. Moreover, during the election campaign of 1990, they went to the FSLN party meeting in Musilayna Creek on 13 February and could be found, along with Angela, among the crowd that welcomed Daniel Ortega during his visit to Bluefields the same month. Guillermo remains silent, at a certain distance from the centre of these events, although he follows with attention what is going on.

"I do not interfere much with other people," he answered our question about whether he meets his neighbours frequently. Nevertheless, he is well informed about what is going on in the community as we found out during our visits to the farm. In January 1991, while discussing the changes after the elections, Guillermo gave us an example of this. Since April 1990, the majority of the parents of Caño Negro stopped sending their children to the small school at the Chapel. The reason for this was that they did not like the school teacher. She and her husband were both active Sandinists, who, after the FSLN defeat, had become personae non grata for most of the UNO supporters in the community. As both were also the principal organizers of community activities, meetings were boycotted and social activities had stopped completely.

Guillermo did not agree with this attitude and told us that he would send his children to school, if they were still at the farm. He deplored the fact that social activities, like the baseball games, were not organized any more. Angela, on the other hand, has little time to spend on other than domestic and commercial chores. In many cases, she does not even have the energy to go to church on Sunday.

José and Lorenza: going forward

The second case study turns our attention to Musilayna Creek, an area southwest of Bluefields where farms are relatively close together. Here, at a two-hour walk from town, is the farm of José and Lorenza. They also have a house in Bluefields, in the Fatima neighbourhood. Lorenza spends most of her time in town, while José moves back and forth between the two homes. As we observed, this is a common pattern resulting from the Contra war and its effects.

Two of the family's three children, grown up and married, live in Bluefields; the third, a daughter, lives in Musilayna, not far from her parents, where she runs a small cattle farm (when she married, her parents gave her a portion of their assets: cows). However, most of the time Lorenza and José take care of one or more of their grandchildren, who call their grandparents "father" and "mother," showing the importance of this relationship. Both José and Lorenza were born in the Bluefields

area and, therefore, consider themselves to be "pure *costeños*" as Lorenza proudly explained.

Although part of the hinterland, it is generally accepted that ecological conditions in the Musilayna area are worse than elsewhere, principally because of poorer soils. This opinion is shared by farmers in the region, farmers from other areas who know Musilayna Creek, and government agronomists in Bluefields. The possible causes and implications of this situation are among the issues dealt with in this case. Another issue is the effects of the Contra war on the household and the ways in which the family has dealt with the problems arising from the war. The active role of José in the social and political organization of farmers — through membership with the UNAG and cooperation with the Catholic church — forms another focus of this case study.

In regional terms, this is a medium-sized cattle enterprise that produces a guaranteed regular income through the daily sale of milk in Bluefields. Besides this principal activity, José and Lorenza grow some crops and intend to re-establish a small business that was ruined by the hurricane.

This family enterprise is different from that of the large-scale producers at the regional level who obtain their income by both the sale of milk and meat, and/or intraregional trade in meat and other commodities, in some cases in combination with running a shop in Bluefields, selling lumber, operating a taxi, or being involved in politics. These large farm enterprises are all located close to Bluefields and have absentee owners, whose farms are managed by a *mandador* or "manager." The farm work is done by one or more paid employees, who are often linked socially with the household that manages the enterprise, while the owners live in town, engage in other economic activities, and visit the farm once or twice a week to check the state of affairs.

Musilayna Creek is close to Bluefields and can be reached without crossing creeks or rivers. This is an important difference from households at the centre or far reaches of the hinterland, who do not have access to a means of transport that allows them to visit town regularly. People in Musilayna Creek can maintain much more regular contact with the regional market and the wider economic and political context.

The enterprise

Lorenza and José bought the 80-ha farm in Musilayna Creek in 1986. A few months after they had settled, the Contras forced them to move to Bluefields where they stayed until the beginning of 1988. It was only then that they slowly started developing the farm.

This was not the first time that the family was forced to leave their home and belongings behind. During the Somoza regime, as a result of a fight with some local National Guards and because of their known anti-Somocist ideas, their land on the shore of the Bay of Bluefields across from Rama Cay island (70 ha with a small coconut plantation and cattle) bought by José's father was confiscated and handed over to a local colonel of Somoza's National Guard.

The family, with their belongings and cattle headed south to the Torsuani River, where they settled on a piece of land next to the farm of José's brother. The latter had established himself a few months earlier. They stayed in Torsuani for many years, until the Contra war forced them to move. On that occasion, a group of Contras stole most of their cattle (70 cows, among them Holsteins); the few animals left were later confiscated by the Sandinist army. They also had to abandon all their crops. Lorenza and José also had to stop their commercial activities in the area. José used to buy crops and charcoal from the farmers and, in return, sell them basic goods that he brought from Bluefields in a small boat. This activity was very profitable, according to José, as he bitterly remembers:

> That was in 1986-87 when the war was at its worst. Therefore I left the farm behind since the Contras interfered with me, and then the army interfered also with me. The farmers were fighting against the Contras and thus they had to leave and everything was left abandoned.... All those years we have suffered a lot. We struggled to survive and we keep on struggling. They forced us to move from one place to the other.... Now, once we get back our farm in Musilayna, I will return to Torsuani to cultivate corn, beans, rice, bananas, melons, tomatoes. I will reconstruct the house and work hard, brother, fighting against the poverty.

Going back to Torsuani is their dream, although they feel the weight of the years more and more on their shoulders and leaving Bluefields would mean being cut off from family and the material advantages of life in the city. They also have some fears about returning, because they believe that some of their "enemies" would kill them if they got the chance. These "enemies" are former farmers of the Torsuani "community" who joined the Contras. Shortly after the revolution, Vicente Sevilla (ex-president of the UNAG-Bluefields) tried to organize these farmers into a credit cooperative for the production of rice. However, the cooperative did not function very well and disintegrated fairly quickly. José had doubts about the cooperative and had refused to become a member. "To me, it did not look alright this cooperative. Why? Because these men were not good workers. This was going to be a *fracaso* [failure]. And what happened? They got firearms and joined the Contra! This was really a *fracaso* for the farmers in the area."

Walking around their farm in Musilayna, one is struck by the devastating effects of the hurricane: the area is covered with a mosaic of fallen trees as a result of the storm. However, not only the hurricane is responsible for the scarcity of living trees on the farm. Since their arrival in 1986, they have been cutting trees to extend the area of grasslands and thus enlarge the area for livestock. This practice is an example of the general deforestation process that is taking place in the region, especially on farms where raising livestock constitutes the main economic activity. Each year, the farmers destroy a few hectares of forest by clearing and burning. Some of the precious lumber is saved and used for construction, but in general the clearing of the forest is done without much consideration for the existing vegetation. In some cases, the cleared area is used for the cultivation of crops (basic

grains) for one or two production cycles, after which the fields are turned into grassland. Except among a small number of farmers, trees are considered to be a disturbing element in the extension of cattle breeding. The interests of most farmers are short-term and, because of the abundance of (forest) land and the possibility of buying land without major obstacles, concern for medium- or long-term consequences is put aside (see also Hofstede and van Leeuwen 1991).

This practice also applies to the small group of relatively large cattle farmers to whom I referred earlier. This is, in general, how deforestation, caused by farming practices, advances in the area. Deforestation contributes to a further degradation of the already poor soils.[14] No exact information is available on the total deforested area in the hinterland, but when one flies over the area the gaps, where forest has been converted to pasture, are clearly visible and, in areas like Musilayna Creek, the dominant feature of the landscape.

It is important, however, to observe that not all farmers deforest in the same way or on the same scale. Among them origins, knowledge, experience, capital, and ambitions may differ significantly and these factors influence their practices. For example, José's habits are not the same as those of Angela and Guillermo (in case study one) and, therefore, have a different impact. Specific knowledge about people's farming methods hardly exists among the ministries and other agencies responsible for the management of the forest and the development of agriculture in the region. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this makes a discussion about alternatives a very complicated affair. The situation is even more complicated by the different scientific points of view on the issue (Hecht and Cockburn 1989).

Not only were the trees damaged by Joan; the farmhouse had received its share, with little wood or zinc sheets left. However, a year later the house had been more or less rebuilt with zinc donated by the UNAG and new boards prepared by one of José's sons who works as a lumberman. The house is surrounded by a kind of yard fenced with wire. The yard serves as the playground for dogs, pigs, chicken, and newborn calves. It is also the place where social activities are organized, such as meetings and *piñatas*, a traditional party for children.

Agriculture and livestock

> Deforestation has been for many years and still is a big problem. ... There is no mentality of forestry in Central American countries. At the moment there is no sign of any downturn in the deforestation rate. There doesn't seem to be the political will higher up in government to really tackle the problem.... One of the problems is that cattle is the thing to have and that the so-called "macho" mentality is to have cattle. People like to take their friends to their farm and show them their cattle. And at the moment we haven't reached the situation where they will take their friends to their farm and show them their trees and this is a thing that we have to try to change, so that it is actually "macho" to have trees. (**David Boucher**, a tree improvement specialist at CATIE, in an interview on BBC radio, 19 October 1988)[15]

On their arrival at the Musilayna Creek farm, Lorenza and José tried to cultivate a variety of crops such as tomatoes, ayotes, chayotes, beans, corn, and plantain, but the results were very discouraging. The soil is too poor to produce these crops; only cassava and quequisque can be grown, and rice on the shores of the creek. This is in contrast with the soils in the Torsuani area, where all kinds of crops grow well. José and Lorenza cultivate rice (two varieties), cassava, quequisque, and a small parcel of corn.

During the *primera* of 1990, the total crop area covered three *manzanas*; this supplied the household with enough food until the next cycle. No surplus was produced. In the *postrera* of the same year, José wanted to sow one *manzana* of corn, but he could not find seeds. Instead he planted two *manzanas* of beans on a parcel with relatively good soil that belongs to their daughter Laura. The bean seeds he bought at the UNAG in Bluefields; he did not have to pay for the land.

Usually, José keeps some of the seeds to be used in the next cycle. Another way of obtaining these is through exchange with neighbours and friends. They make use of these networks only in case of emergency. As José explained, "When one has and the other has not, the former gives to the latter," without asking for payment. As I described, fields are prepared by the slash and burn method, which progressively deforests the area. José defends this by saying that there is still a large area of "*monte crudo*" or uncultivated area on his farm.

During the summer of 1990, the enterprise owned 21 cows, which at that time produced about 25 litres of milk a day. During the rainy season from May to December, this amount can increase to 60 litres. They sell the milk in the Fatima neighbourhood. This form of livestock is considered by José as "cattle for production," i.e., it produces milk, which provides the household with a regular income.

When we asked other producers who knew the family about the enterprise, they classified it as a medium farm. It stands in contrast with the farms that produce cattle for slaughter, i.e., for the sale of meat, which represents a very good business in the region. In April 1990, the price of one litre of milk was 25,000 cordobas (US$0.33). This meant a daily income of 625,000 cordobas (US$8.25) for the 25 litres. In the long term, José and Lorenza aspire to raise cattle for slaughter, a hope José says he shares with many farmers in the vicinity of Bluefields.

Farmers who raise livestock for meat are obviously better off: most of them have one or more horses (occasionally they will show up — in full "macho" pontificals — in town on their horse as I witnessed during the visit of Daniel Ortega). They occupy farms and houses in town that are in much better shape than the average and own luxury goods, such as televisions and radios. Having cows represents a particular economic condition: a means to reduce risks, guarantee a regular monetary income, an emergency fund, and in the case of high inflation a way to protect assets. It also represents a style of living that is informed by the material conditions of cattle breeding and shaped by particular values.

Cattle production in the region is extensive. For each cow two *manzanas* of non-improved or one *manzana* of improved grassland are required. Stables are rare in the region, although José intended to build a small one for the newborn calves

to protect them from rain and muddy soils. Irregularly the animals are treated with injections and vitamins, which are hard to get and very expensive. Technical assistance from MIDINRA or other institutions is almost nil; artificial insemination and breeding programs, executed or stimulated by government or other agencies, do not exist on the Atlantic Coast. Most farmers use *Retana* grass as feed, which is not very rich in nutritious elements. Experiments with other varieties and recommendations by, for example, the bank have so far not produced any significant results. However, some farmers have successfully introduced other varieties, such as *Brachiaria*, better adapted to conditions in the humid tropics.

Lorenza and José obtained 8 of their 21 cows on credit provided in February 1990. The provision of this credit was the result of a 5-month process of negotiations between the BND, MIDINRA, and the UNAG, in which the bank finally gave in under pressure exercised by the farmers' union. An 80 million cordoba loan was used to buy 40 cows in the Fifth Region; they were divided among three farmers from Musilayna — José, Miguel (a close friend and neighbour, see below), and Vicente Sevilla (at that time the president of the UNAG) — and two farmers from Caño Negro.

I suspected that the decision was influenced by electoral considerations and asked Vicente Sevilla about it. Rather to my surprise, he admitted that this was the case. The bank said that the loan had to be paid back every three months over two years with an annual interest rate of 13%. This was established before the elections and the change of government took place.

Personal and political interests of the UNAG president played a fundamental role in this fight for credit to buy cattle. Vicente Sevilla managed to convince José and Lorenza, close friends, to participate in the case. José tells us the story in his own words:

> I had 13 cows on my farm and one day Vicente came to see me and he started to speak to me, "José, we will go to buy cattle and we will work with the bank. This is a support for the farmers... we have to fight..." Alright, we went to Rama, until Prescilla to buy the cows. But I told him, I am going to think about this question. You can go and buy, I don't want to buy and compromise myself with the bank. He spoke to me once more: "Let us buy these cows, this is really to help us and within one year we have paid back the money with the sale of milk." Ok, I had my farm ready, the grasslands, the fences and then the people from the bank they put the cows on my land. I said to Vicente that I had not made a promise to buy cows. But again Vicente spoke...

In November 1990, José and Lorenza managed to "become free" again as they said, after paying back the bank; their debt had been renegotiated at 45 million cordobas spread over a three-month period. Although the bank director had offered them more time to repay the loan, they preferred to liberate themselves as soon as possible. Lorenza explained why: "Because, these days with the new cordoba oro and inflation going up, one never knows what is going to happen."

The organization of labour

To run the enterprise, José and Lorenza employ a *mandador* to take care of the daily labour tasks. This man is an old friend from the time they lived in the Torsuani area. José, sometimes accompanied by Lorenza, travels almost daily between Bluefields and the farm, over land (by foot) or over water (by canoe). They never sleep on the farm, because of the threat of a Contra attack. This fear is deeply rooted in the family. As José explains: "Ever since I declared myself a Sandinist, the 'people' [*los Contras* or opponents of the FSLN] they know me." They have even developed a special strategy to travel: one day over land, the next day over water.

Arriving at the farm, José coordinates the labour with his *mandador*, gives orders to his workers, inspects cows and crops, and occasionally visits friends or calls his neighbours for a meeting. Around midday he returns home and in the afternoon he occupies himself with questions related to his work for the UNAG or other social organizational activities. They hire workers at peak periods in the agricultural cycle, especially to clear land for sowing. In April 1990, two young men from Bluefields cleared three *manzanas* for sowing the *primera*. Their salaries were fixed at one million cordobas per *manzana* plus food. According to José, around Bluefields it is very hard to find workers. Moreover, they ask for all kind of things and usually do not work as he would like them to do. This opinion was shared by most of the other farmers with whom I spoke about the issue of the labour force available for rural jobs.

Sometimes José works with his brother, Elisandro, who owns a farm in Musilayna and one along the Torsuani River and a house in Bluefields. Dividing his time between the three places, Elisandro grows crops (corn, rice, and bananas, among others), raises cattle (20 cows for milk production), and cuts lumber for sale. Elisandro is a good example of a farmer who successfully combines several economic activities. In contrast to José, he managed to stay in the Torsuani area despite problems with the Contras. According to Elisandro, this is because he is a very pragmatic man: "If the Contras come, they ask for food and you have to give it to them to avoid troubles. If the Sandinists come, they also ask for food. I am not in favour of any of them. I am a realistic man. I am not a politician, but just a poor fighter."

When I asked José about his brother's experiences with the Contras, he commented that Elisandro made some good money with them, providing them with all kinds of products they needed. The work between the two brothers is based on *mano vuelta*; they help each other. For the *primera* of 1990, they planted five *manzanas* of cassava and quequisque together on a parcel of land along the Torsuani river that was cleared and burned and that would guarantee them a good harvest.

As I mentioned earlier, before the hurricane and during the years in Torsuani, Lorenza and José spent part of their time buying and selling products. When they bought the house in Bluefields, this business was turned into a "*pulperia*," a small shop where they sold a variety of basic products, including soft drinks, beer, and

liquors. This was a very profitable activity, according to Lorenza, who played a major role in running the shop. Unfortunately, the hurricane blew away their house and *pulperia*, and they have not been able to reopen their business, although they would like to. A major investment would be the acquisition of a freezer, which costs about US$1000. On several occasions, Lorenza mentioned their intention to buy one, but so far they haven't. The new political situation influenced their decisions about investments.

> We have to see what kind of movements and projects Violeta [Barrios, the new president] is going to develop. Right now we cannot do anything. I have the hope that we start again our *pulperia* in Bluefields to sell some products, beer, liquors, soft drinks.... I have some money that I saved. We will see and wait. She [the president] said that after some time, everything will become better. Pues..." (José)

A year later, the *pulperia* was still a "project" that they strived to realize.

Miguel: neighbour and friend

Earlier I mentioned that Miguel, friend and neighbour of the family, plays an important role in their life, especially concerning José's work for the UNAG. I will give a brief description of his background, family relations, productive activities, and perceptions.

Miguel, a young man of 25 years, came to Bluefields in 1984 from the area of El Tortuguero because of the Contra war. With the help of MIDINRA, he got 80 *manzanas* of land in Musilayna Creek, then still largely a forest area. However, between 1984 and 1986 the area was rapidly colonized by people coming from regions affected by the war, such as La Cruz de Río Grande, Punta Gorda, Torsuani, and El Tortuguero.

In 1986, the war troubles reached Musilayna Creek, and most families, in fear of attacks, moved temporarily to Bluefields. It was not until 1988 that they returned to their farms, but maintaining close relations with the city where most of them had built a house or had settled with family or friends.

According to Miguel, the soils at Musilayna Creek are only fit for cattle raising; agriculture hardly meets subsistence needs. This observation is based on a comparison with farming practice and results in El Tortuguero where soils are of much better quality. For many displaced families, having to adapt to worse conditions remains a bitter pill. What is left of former experiences are the memories of the "good old days" when harvests were abundant and considerable surpluses could be sold on the market in Bluefields.

During the summer of 1990, some family members — his father, stepmother, two half-brothers, a brother, his wife, and child — had all clustered around Miguel, who through his contacts with the UNAG and the Catholic Church managed to get access to some basic goods. These family members were using him and his farm as a "springboard" to settle in the area themselves. All packed together in his

farmhouse, they tried via INRA, the agrarian reform ministry, and UNAG to get access to a parcel of land of their own, while also looking for other job alternatives (e.g., his brother wanted to work as a teacher of adults). This family is representative of many war-displaced families, who have resettled after going through a series of adaptations, and trying to make the best of things.

When we first met Miguel, he was accompanied by a young woman who was living on the farm with their child. At the same time, three other children of another *compañera* were staying at his mother's house in Bluefields. A few months later, when we met him again, he was living on the farm with another young woman, who was pregnant. The first woman had left.

These situations are the result of rather casual sexual relations between men and women in the region and in the country in general. Men have several sexual relations at the same time and have children with more than one woman. Sometimes they recognize these children, sometimes they do not. This practice, combined with the effects of the war (men in the army, with the Contras, or dead in the war) has resulted in many women left alone with children. In many cases these children have different fathers. On an ideological level, this practice is justified by a double moral standard: men have the right to behave in this way and women have not. Moreover, men have to prove their sexual capacity with each partner no matter the consequences for the women (CIERA 1989; ENVIO, May 1991).

Miguel cultivates rice, cassava, quequisque and corn, but mainly for his own consumption. In case of a small surplus, he sells cassava and quequisque to friends or rice to ECODEPA, which is willing to pay a good price. His most important activity is the breeding of cattle and, therefore, he must develop the pastures in the area. He agreed to follow the advice of the agronomists of the bank to introduce grass varieties such as *Brachiaria*, that are better adapted to the local ecological conditions. However, it is difficult to obtain seeds, although Miguel has been looking for some time. If the experiment is a success, the introduction of the new grass among farmers will go rapidly, according to him, since there already exists a tradition of exchange of seeds and information. He uses a slash and burn system similar to that of José, although he stresses that he tries to take care of the trees that are still found on his land.

He owns eight cows, which he obtained through the credit plan discussed above. During the summer of 1990, the cows produced about six litres of milk daily for family consumption. The low level of milk production was due to the effects of transporting the cattle from Rama to Bluefields and their slow adaptation to the new environment.

The UNAG: "We have to go forward!"

Miguel and José became actively involved in the UNAG after the hurricane. The very first task they were given in the days after the disaster was to compile a census of all the families living in the Musilayna Creek area, including the ones situated at Las Pavas and El Danto creeks. Based on this census, the distribution of aid was

organized (see Chapter 2) through the UNAG and the Catholic Church. They were also asked to take charge of this activity. José and Lorenza's farm was turned into a distribution centre and both men made innumerable trips back and forth to Bluefields to transport the donations (food, clothes, zinc, and nails).

Although the election defeat was a big blow to the UNAG and its active members, they continued trying to organize farmers in the community. For this reason, the UNAG leaders kept calling on José and Miguel to participate in meetings at the regional office, an activity that consumed at least one or two days a week of their time. Notwithstanding the "we won't give up" attitude of the farmer union, the impact of the election results was felt by the two men in their work at farm level. Somewhat disappointed, José told me one afternoon: "It seems that the people do not want to work with the UNAG any more. They are afraid because they voted for the UNO. They asked me to organize the women of the community to bring them to a workshop and to ask them to prepare food for the celebration of Christmas, but they did not want to come. They are afraid."

In February 1991, the idea of forming a cooperative of 12 families was born with the goal of applying for a loan to buy cattle. For José, participation in this cooperative was mainly motivated by his desire to help the other farmers of the community, since he already had cattle: "Although I am old already, I can help the others. I have my animals and I can manage alone, but it hurts me to see those poor people who do not have. Hence, since I have, I would like to see that the other also has.... This is how we continue to fight because it is a good thing to get rid of this egoism! To work together is how we will advance!"

As José explained, again people were reluctant to participate because of their close links with the UNAG. The other farmers associated the union with the FSLN. Partly out of fear of political repercussions and partly because of open dislike for the Sandinists, the farmers preferred not to become involved in the cooperative. However, armed with the new Law on Cooperatives and his experience and skills, José explained to them that the cooperative would not be owned or ruled by the UNAG or by him personally; it would be an independent association. He said that the UNAG exists to support them.

When we left Bluefields, the formation of the cooperative was continuing. Another activity in which both men participate is the reconstruction of a small school and a chapel, which were destroyed in the hurricane. Miguel, who has some experience in health service, was trying to extend the anti-measles campaign to the community. This was a welcome initiative, because the people, especially the children, are very susceptible to this disease, which had already caused many deaths in the region.

Teresa and Bernardo: not giving up

The households in the first two case studies were confronted with the cruelties of the Contra war. They managed to overcome the problems that came with it by making use of particular personal and social resources. The adaptations they had

to make were far from easy and led to some significant changes in living and working styles and conditions. The third case study, the household of Teresa (31 years) and Bernardo (40 years), will tell us another story of how the coastal people have been affected by the war. Their story is about a series of forced resettlements from one coastal zone to another and the difficulties of "starting all over again" with nothing more than a few personal belongings and a shelter made of plastic.

Their experience is dramatic and painful. It illustrates the consequences of the Contra war for the social, economic, and political organization in Nicaragua and how it has affected people psychologically. For example, one day, when Bluefields was celebrating its anniversary, we were pleasantly surprised by a visit from Teresa and three of her daughters. At one point, one of the daughters, Marcela, who was eight years old, asked me when she heard the explosions of fireworks if the contras were coming to attack us.

This story will reveal how already poor people have had to suffer even more. However, despite their misery, poverty, and continuing insecurity, this case also demonstrates the will to survive of people and the forms in which they have adapted to new circumstances in an attempt to create a better life — not so much for themselves, but for their children, as Bernardo told us.

The household is in the settlement of San Mariano, about 15 km north of Bluefields where a group of displaced households who originally came from the Punta Gorda river zone finally settled after a long exodus from their home community. Here, the Sandinist government proposed that they work on a cocopalm plantation that forms part of a large-scale agroindustrial project to be developed on the Atlantic Coast as an economic alternative for the region. Until 1990, the plantation was owned by the state and managed by a technical and administrative unit that had its office in Bluefields. With no alternative, the resettled families accepted the offer. They formed a cooperative of workers on the plantation — as opposed to plantation workers — and began sowing the palms.

However, at the same time they began again to take up agriculture and other economic activities (fishing, cutting lumber, making charcoal). Hence, in practice they became both paid labourers and producers.[16] This differentiates this enterprise from the first two and our interest is to describe and analyze what it means in everyday life to be member of a cooperative, participate in a state-run development project, and live in a rural settlement. In other words, how do people shape and experience these new socioeconomic and political structures created by the Sandinist government to transform Nicaraguan society.

This case study will also serve to illustrate two other important issues. The first is the role and position of women in the rural economy and, more generally, in the Nicaraguan society. Taking the experience of Teresa as example, I will describe some of the aspects of the struggle for equal rights of women in a social context where the values and norms of machismo are still dominant. The story of Teresa — far from complete, although we came to know her quite well during the research — will also serve as a window to look at the role played by the regional "Women's Unit" of the UNAG, which fights for the emancipation of rural women in the country. The second issue is the significance and impact of small-scale projects as

realized by non-governmental agencies (national and international). In San Mariano, some of these projects have been executed with varying success. However, before documenting these issues, we will present a short history of San Mariano and its inhabitants.

Before 1979, the land around San Mariano belonged to Harry E. Brautigam, a member of one of the most prosperous coastal families during the Somoza regime (see Chapter 7 for more details). During the 1950s, bananas were cultivated there for export to the USA, but around 1960 the plantation was turned into a cattle farm. At the time of the revolution, the land belonged to Elmer Jackson, an agronomist and farmer who had started the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock in the town of Bluefields under the Somoza regime. Because of debt problems, Jackson had to turn over the land to the National Development Bank. After the revolution, the MIDINRA's agrarian reform institute took control of the land.

In 1984, the cooperative "Germán Pomares Ordoñez" was founded and given 150 ha of cocotal; the other 137 ha remained under the control of a so-called "state production unit." The actual management of the plantation became the responsibility of a special state enterprise (named after a regional revolutionary, Enrique Campbell), controlled by MIDINRA. However, the area provided a kind of last-minute solution where about 45,000 cocopalm seeds could be planted that otherwise would have been lost, because the originally planned production areas of Punta Gorda and San Juan del Norte were plagued by Contra attacks. According to the 1990 director of the Enrique Campbell enterprise, the soils in San Mariano were not appropriate for the cocopalm. The dualistic character of the enterprise, partly cooperative, partly state-run, and its differentiated policy concerning salaries, services, and technical assistance in favour of the latter has created continuous problems for the people of San Mariano, as I will discuss in due course.[17]

After the hurricane, a little school was built with the financial help of a Swedish non-government organization (DIAKONIA). About 30 children of the settlement attend the school in two groups, the youngest in the morning (first and second grades), the older ones in the afternoon (third and fourth grades) — that is, if the teacher, who lives in Bluefields, arrives, which frequently is not the case. Hence, the education level in San Mariano remains low and prospects for improvement are sombre. For the children who would like to continue after fourth grade, the only alternative is to go to Bluefields, which in reality is nothing more than a dream since their parents do not have the economic means to send them to the city.

Concerning health service, the situation is even worse: there is no health centre or even a community health assistant in San Mariano. When someone is seriously sick, he or she must canoe to Bluefields to visit the regional hospital or one of the neighbourhood health centres in the hope of receiving some kind of treatment. Frequently, the doctors and nurses are too busy to see all the waiting patients. The result: a request to return tomorrow, which for some means finding a place to sleep in town or going back home and trying their luck a day or a few days later. To visit a private doctor is too expensive.

Life and work

In the settlement, there are three families headed by a woman. Their husbands were either kidnapped by the Contras and did not return or they were killed during the war. The lives of these women and their children is very hard. It is almost impossible for them to work on the plantation and take care of their children and domestic chores. As Martina, who is the head of a household with three children, says:

> Life here for us is very hard. We do not have work and we feel *afligidas* [sad]. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I think, how are we going to survive in this situation? We have suffered so much already.... And then, take this *tienda campesina*: this is not a shop for the peasantry, it sells more expensive than ENABAS in Bluefields. It is worse than the black market, worse than the traders of the black market! And the products they sell are of bad quality. We, peasants, want to buy good things and not *una cochinada* [i.e., of inferior quality]. Here in this shop they are killing us. And that's why the people have to canoe and canoe and canoe to Bluefields, but that's *mentira* [a lie, i.e., simply impossible].... Our salaries for working on the plantation are very low and unjust. You can not buy anything with 19,000 cordobas. One litre of cooking oil costs 100,000 cordobas. With the salary of one day you can buy two or three pounds of rice, but with three children in my house I am not able to feed them well.

Teresa and Bernardo have 11 children, four boys and seven girls.[18] Among them is a girl, who they adopted from a sister of Teresa. The oldest child, a boy, is 15 years old; the youngest, also a boy, is eight months. Bernardo, a quiet, introverted man, was born in Rivas on the Pacific coast. At the age of 15, after his mother was killed by Somoza's Guardia Nacional, he went "*de vago*" (his words), away from Rivas and exploring new horizons, passing through Costa Rica, San Carlos, and El Almendro, a place close to Nueva Guinea in the fifth region. He finally reached Punta Gorda where he looked for a farm to settle on.

Teresa was born in Santo Domingo (Chontales). She came to Punta Gorda at the age of one year when her parents moved to the Atlantic Coast in search of better land. As a young girl she left her parents to work on a farm in El Almendro where she met Bernardo at the age of 14. Together they returned to Punta Gorda where one year later she had their first child, who unfortunately died after a few weeks. When she was 16, their oldest boy was born. She is a very intelligent woman, persistent, and with a nice sense of humour. Innumerable times she made us laugh with her down-to-earth perceptions on events and people.

Over the last seven years, the family has had a very hard time weathering the situation I described earlier. After being evacuated six times, forced time after time to leave behind scarce belongings, land, and animals, they finally settled in San Mariano.[19] As Bernardo says:

> In Monte Creek we left all our work behind, the cooperative, the coco trees, our animals, and we came to San Mariano. Here the enemy [Contras] does not come, but we do not harvest. There are no good soils. But so far we have not given up.

In almost every conversation we had with them, they remembered the good times in Punta Gorda. "There, we lived happy. We cultivated all kind of crops, corn, beans, rice, bananas, plantains, coco, sugarcane. We had our cows and pigs. The soils were very good for agriculture. The only problem was the transport to Bluefields," says Bernardo. How big the transportation problem was is illustrated by the fact that Teresa visited Bluefields for the first time when they were evacuated for the fifth time. She was 25 years old!

Despite the good memories, they do not want to return to Punta Gorda. After the change of government in April 1990, many families have gone back, among them Teresa's parents. However, they prefer to stay in San Mariano, although sometimes Teresa feels so sad that she would like to escape the settlement for one production cycle. Anticipation of the first coconut harvest and the proximity to Bluefields are the two main reasons behind their decision to stay. Moreover, without external material support, lumber and zinc to build a house, and food for the first six months, returning would be a very risky enterprise, especially with 11 children.

> The work of the *campesino* is hard. Working daily in the fields, fighting against the insects and snakes, coming home dirty and not having a chance to take a shower while having to wash your trousers for next day's work before going to sleep. City life is much more comfortable. But, everything in life has some utility: some produce clothes, others shoes and we, *campesinos*, produce food. We all need each other. However, despite the revolution not everybody seems to understand this. (Bernardo)

From 1985 until 1990, Bernardo was the president of the cocopalm cooperative (see Chapter 2). In April 1990, a new president was elected, Francisco (see note 19), a militant FSLN and UNAG member, and economically the most prosperous person in the settlement. When we asked Bernardo what he thought about this change, he answered with a smile: "I left when Daniel [Ortega] left. I was becoming a kind of dictator." He added that he liked being free from a lot of the obligations, for example, from the regular tiring visits to Bluefields to deal with questions concerning the cooperative. According to other members of the cooperative, Bernardo was a "soft line" president who always tried to resolve problems by discussion and consensus. Some thought that this attitude was too flexible and they hoped that Francisco would follow a harder line.

After the hurricane the family house — if it can be called that — was rebuilt with 80% zinc (donated via the UNAG) and 20% lumber. The wind and rain can come in on all sides; during the dry season it feels like being in an oven. Although they would like to replace the zinc sheets with wood, they do not have the money to buy the latter or to buy an electric saw that would allow them to cut the lumber

they need. The house is composed of a "living room," an annexed kitchen in which their few personal belongings are stored, and a small sleeping room where the whole family crowds together during the night.

Among their belongings, the radio plays an important role. It is a crucial means of keeping in touch with the rest of the world (region, country, continent). Bernardo and Teresa try to listen, at least once a day, to the news on the local and Costa Rican radio stations. When the Persian Gulf war broke out, they asked me about it on several occasions. Comparing this tragedy with their own war experiences, they said they felt sorry for the innocent victims. However, batteries are expensive and sometimes there is no money to buy new ones.[20]

Until April 1990, the members of the cooperative concentrated on two basic economic activities: as paid labourers, they worked to maintain the coco plantation receiving a salary according to tasks fulfilled. In fact, the salaries were actually paid in the form of a long-term loan. The idea was that once the plantation starts to produce coconuts, each member would pay back his accumulated salary debt. Calculations of these debts are very unclear, due to the astronomical inflation rates during the Sandinist regime. Moreover, in 1988, the debt accumulated so far was declared zero by a presidential decree. When we asked Bernardo about the debt situation under the UNO government, he told us that the bank was preparing new data that they would present to the cooperative at the beginning of 1991.

In addition to this work, they produce basic grains and other crops for family consumption and commercial purposes. Moreover, some families produce charcoal, fish, and/or breed pigs or chicken around their houses. Francisco, until 1989 the only member owning cows, which he had managed to bring from Monte Creek, used to sell milk and homemade cheese which guaranteed him a regular income.

However, in April and May 1990, two new economic activities were initiated in the settlement. The women, organized in a work group, started a chicken project, while the men were given a small cattle project. At the end of 1990, a plan was proposed by the company to distribute the 170 ha of the cooperative among its members: each male member (according to the agrarian reform policy) would receive and become the owner of 5 ha of cocopalm. In a following section, I will discuss in more detail these "projects" and their significance.

Maintaining the coco plantation, a task called *chapea*, is a hard and unpleasant job. Usually, the work is done from early in the morning (between 0500 and 0600) until midday when the sun becomes too hot to continue. With a machete, the plantation is cleared of weeds and other unwanted vegetation and, once every three or four months, the area is fumigated with insecticides and herbicides. Mostly this work is done by the men and boys. However, some women, among them Teresa, do this tough job to earn a little more money, so needed for regular household expenses.

According to Bernardo, in a regular day one can do one *tarea*, i.e., an area 25 by 50 m. Only by working until 1600 or 1700 in the afternoon can one finish two *tareas*, an exceptional effort. In January 1990, the salary per *tarea* was 20,000 cordobas or US$0.43. In May of the same year, the salary for one *tarea* increased to 70,000 cordobas (US$1.24). The same salaries were paid to the labourers on the

UPE (state production unit) located in San Nicolás, although, in the UPE, tasks were more diversified and included cutting lumber and firewood and inspecting for plagues. Moreover, on the UPE, the company guaranteed certain services such as the construction or repair of houses, a communal kitchen, and regular and free transportation to Bluefields.

> The bank does not have money to develop the company. It does not have money to pay a better salary to the workers. One really makes an effort to do two *tareas* a day, but you have to give everything of yourself. And look at it, we need one gallon of cooking oil a week, which right now costs more than 200,000 cordobas. And that with a salary of 20,000 cordobas a day. We spend 10,000 cordobas daily to buy milk for the children.... The life of a worker is very hard. And we have to buy our machete, file, working trousers, soap.

As Bernardo explained, salaries are very low, which makes the motivation to work on the plantation minimal. From April 1989 to February 1990, their monthly income varied from US$0.46 to US$16.92 (for four months no income at all was obtained).[21] This income does not cover basic consumption needs. It is clear that most of the family's labour goes into other economic activities, especially to produce food crops, such as basic grains and roots. In November 1990, they decided to stop working for the company, because the salaries had become almost nothing compared to the prices of basic products. Although agriculture was also problematic in many ways, it was more rewarding in terms of satisfying basic needs. "The situation is worse than before," Bernardo told us, "because in the times of Daniel [Ortega] they give us at least rice, beans, and cooking oil when we did not have anything to eat. Right now, nothing of that at all."

For Teresa, although as a labourer on the coco plantation she is earning the same salary as Bernardo, the low salary becomes an additional burden, because she is also responsible for domestic chores — cooking, looking for firewood, washing, buying food in Bluefields — and the care of the children. It is a miracle that she finds time to design and make clothes for the children, at which she is very skilled. Taking care of their children takes a lot of energy, because they are often sick due to the poor housing conditions of the family and the irregular and unbalanced diet. Despite the fact that the older children (ranging from 8 to 15 years) help their mother take care of the younger ones (between 1 and 7 years) **and play a key role in other domestic chores**, she is unable to fulfill this task as she would like. On top of all this, she sometimes has to deal with a drunk Bernardo, who, when in a state like this, "becomes wild and starts arguing with me."

The problem of alcoholism, in most cases among men, is very serious in Nicaragua. In the towns and cities, drunk men can be found in bars and restaurants night after night. In the countryside, drunkeness appears often after the sale of harvests or other products or after pay days in the case of agricultural enterprises and cooperatives. The relatively low cost of the national liquor, rum, does little to prevent people from excessive drinking, which frequently goes hand in hand with acts of violence (CIERA 1989: 190; Rodríguez 1990: 45-46; ENVIO, 25 May 1991).

Unfortunately, contributing to the violence is the large number of firearms among the population (due to the revolution and the Contra war). Personal disputes at bars are fought with guns instead of words, a phenomenon which reflects and is reflected by the ways problems are resolved in the Nicaraguan society at more complex levels of social organization. Without doubt, machismo has a strong influence on this.

To return to Teresa's story, for some months, instead of working on the plantation, she worked in the *tienda campesina* of the settlement. Although the salary she earned in the small shop was as low as the one paid by the coco company, the labour was much easier and she could keep an eye on her children. She left this job when the shop got into financial difficulties, due to poor central administration and management and the low spending capacity of the inhabitants of the settlement. "The people do not have money," she pointed out.

The production of basic food crops

The low salaries and the fact that so far the plantation has not started producing coconuts are the main reasons why the families in San Mariano spend more time and energy on the production of food crops than on maintenance of the palm trees. However, the cultivation of food crops represents another problem. The soils are too poor to produce adequate amounts of corn and beans and slash and burn practices cannot be used because of the risk of damaging the plantation. The small parcels amid the cocopalms, year after year, produce smaller harvests, a serious problem for the large households. Looking for land in other areas implies the risk of running into the small Contra groups that still move around the region.

At the beginning of 1990, the land reform department of MIDINRA, after many demands from the people of San Mariano, offered the cooperative 100 ha of land around Barcelona not far from the settlement (see Chapter 2). These 100 ha can be used for the cultivation of rice, corn, beans, cassava, and quequisque, solving some of the problems related to the provision of basic food crops.

For Bernardo and Teresa, the first harvest of basic grains (September 1990) on the newly obtained land was not promising, once more meaning a drastic reduction in consumption levels. Fortunately, in the second year (September 1991), the yield of both basic grains and cassava-quequisque was above average, alleviating somewhat the food problems.[22]

All work in the fields is done manually, with planting stick and machete. Seeds are produced year after year at household level, by retaining part of the harvest. Sometimes seeds are obtained from other cooperative members or from friends around San Mariano. A few years ago, they tried to cultivate other crops, such as cabbage, lettuce, and watermelon, but with poor results. Banana and plantain were also problematic; only a few musaceae trees can be found in the area.

The household maintains irregular contact with the market. Because of the problem in satisfying basic food needs, in most harvest periods no surplus is produced. In exceptional cases when they have been able to sell some produce, e.g., quequisque in September 1990, the market price was so low that they said it was

like giving away the crop. They decided that it would be better to let the quequisque sprout again instead of selling it on the market, which they considered a waste of energy and humiliating in front of the merchants.

In the case of charcoal, which they produced until 1990, they had to confront another problem: the traders from Bluefields who bought the charcoal were the ones who reaped the profits. In January 1990, for example, they sold charcoal for 30 to 40 thousand cordobas a bag. The traders then resold it for 80 thousand cordobas. In December of the same year, the situation had not changed. The price paid to Teresa for a bag had increased due to inflation to 2.5 million cordobas, but the resale price was 5 million cordobas. "They are gaining twice the amount of money than we do and then they dare to say that the *campesinos* sell to them too high."

Expectations are high among the people of San Mariano concerning the future of the coconut plantation. Bernardo is looking forward to the time when the trees will start to produce large quantities of fruit. "One day we hope to have a small generator that will give us electricity. We would like to buy a television for the children so that they could learn about other things and places. We also would like to buy a refrigerator for the community." After seven years of waiting, the possibility of selling the fruits of their labour compensates for the suffering they have gone through.

However, in September 1991, new problems arose. The price paid in Bluefields for the first coconuts was extremely low and demand was limited. The processing plant that the Ministry of Agriculture had been promising to install for many years was still nowhere to be found, turning both FSLN and UNO plans into nothing more than propagandistic slogans and empty promises. In San Mariano no storage facilities had been constructed and transportation to Bluefields continued to be by cayuco. "This country needs two years more to advance," commented Bernardo bitterly, "and it looks like the coco project has to go the same road."

"*The men do not care about women*": *gender relations and problems*

> We are aware that our peasant organization has been strengthened in its different forms of organization. We will become stronger day after day through a more audacious and belligerent participation to consolidate the revolution and obtain equal rights for men and women.
> **(Manifest of *Campesinas* organized in the UNAG** 1990: 3)

Apart from her work on the plantation, in agriculture, and at home, Teresa is actively involved in the organization of women in the settlement. In these activities, she receives the support of the Women' Unit of the UNAG, especially of Elba Chow, who has been head of the regional unit since 1989. However, from the very beginning of their struggle for a better life for the women, most of the men have opposed the active role played by Teresa, Elba, and another woman leader. Teresa's active participation in meetings, her frequent visits to the UNAG office in Bluefields, her participation in two UNAG meetings in Managua, and her opinions

about equal rights for both sexes are disliked by most men and the object of silly jokes and negative comments. Machismo, present at all levels of Nicaraguan society continues to be an obstacle for the emancipation of women (Peréz Alemán 1990). Teresa says:

> The men, they do not care about women. Recently one of the men sold a calf and with the money he went to Bluefields. He spent all the money on rum and a pair of shoes for himself. For his wife, nothing. But she, she does not say a word, no complaints, absolutely nothing. I told her, they can do whatever they want, but I will fight for my rights. That is for sure! I asked for a parcel of cocopalm for myself. But in the meeting the responsible of production said that the woman depends on the man and that I should handle this with Bernardo. I told him that I work with the machete in the same way as the men do and that I have the right to have my own parcel. But they do not want to give me anything.

Gender relations and day-to-day struggle for equality are not only illustrated in economic terms and the division of labour, where women have to negotiate with men to get access to resources. They are also expressed in feelings of jealousy, dislike, and sometimes open hatred. In San Mariano, where families live very close to each other and where everyone has known everyone else for many years, these feelings sometimes cause emotional stress for the persons affected. More than once, Teresa, upset and disappointed, told us about these kinds of experiences.

As I mentioned, for two years, the UNAG has had a special section that was created to give special attention to the organization and emancipation of farm women. In her work at the regional level, Elba Chow has encountered many of the problems that Teresa faces in San Mariano. To highlight some of the facets of the problem of women's organization and liberation, I report portions of an interview with Elba about her experience as the first regional delegate of UNAG's Women's Unit on the coast.

> The women's program aims to free women from the enormous backwardness. However, we, the woman leaders should not throw the ball straight away. We, have to talk with women about production, the health of their children, alimentation. But we cannot tell them straight away that our struggle concerns the emancipation of women. Because this will never enter the heads of their men. As I told you before, it is not the first time that they throw me out...
>
> Hence, I organize women and men in small projects which I call mixed mini-projects. I tell women that they have the same rights as men and I tell the men that their *compañeras* have the same rights as them. Furthermore, we organize some small meetings which are also mixed. This is to give confidence to the men. But then there comes a moment in which we tell the woman: "Look, how are you going on to believe that it is correct that your husband beats you only because he wants to beat you? Tell him that you are a worthy person and that you are equally sensitive." Ok, in this way we are

> changing the mentality of the *campesina*; what she should do and how she should convince her husband.

As Elba explains, the realization of small, but concrete steps in this emancipation process forms the most important goal of her pioneering work:

> One of her liberations should be to participate in meetings; and to have the equal right to sell a chicken or a pig. Another right women have, is to have their own money and **this** has been the main key that we have found among women! When women begin to have their own money, when they feel that **they** have money, they say: "I will buy myself a packet of cigarettes, because this money is **mine!** I am the one that will smoke them."

However, sometimes she has problems convincing women who are using the same arguments as men do, thus defending existing gender-based values and norms (of machismo). Elba's account demonstrates that the divisions created by gender will not simply change as a result of doing things in another way. The conditions under which things are done, perceived, and valued also need to be changed. She gave an example of this problem:

> Once, a woman said to me: "Why should I go to work when my husband works?" I gave her the following example. Look, *hermana*, you should go to work and do you know why? When the cooperative pays him every 15 days, he washes himself, changes his trousers and shirt, cleans his shoes and leaves to make his tour around the settlement while you stay humiliated at home to take care of the children, looking how he carries the money in his pocket of his trousers. On his round he stops somewhere and begins to ask for rum and you stay humiliated behind. And who does cook week after week for this man? Who does wash his dirty shirts and working trousers?
>
> Then, when the man returns home and his wife asks him for some money, he answers: "I don't have money." The woman asks him: "What have you done with your salary?" The first thing the man will say to her is: "This money is mine and I drink it as I like; hey, it is mine!" Then the woman asked me: "How did you know that my husband behaves like that?" That is what she told me! Hence, this is one of the ways in which we tell the truth. When you tell the truth to somebody, this person begins to have confidence in you. In this way we work with women and make them understand their reality.

The making and remaking of two new projects

One of the basic problems of the people of San Mariano is the lack of economic alternatives that could guarantee at least a minimal income for each household and lessen the risk of failing harvests. Between 1984 and 1990, neither the cooperative nor the institutions involved in rural development (MIDINRA, the cocopalm company, the bank, and the UNAG) were able or willing to undertake any action

to improve this situation. It was only because of the hurricane that serious attention was given to this problem. Concern was aroused when it became clear that once the post-hurricane food donations were gone, no real alternative would be available.

When a Swedish non-governmental organization agreed to finance two small income-generating projects, INSSBI and the regional government, in cooperation with the UNAG and MIDINRA, decided to spend the money on a chicken-breeding project for the women and a cattle-breeding project for the men of San Mariano.[23] The wishes of the people were not considered in these plans; in meetings held after the hurricane with the abovementioned institutions, people expressed an interest in cows to obtain milk. Nor was there any discussion of the clear gender-biased ideology behind the projects.

Between February and May, the "*galerón*," an enclosed area with a chicken house in the middle, was constructed under the supervision of a technician from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to whom INSSBI had delegated the work. Materials were brought from Bluefields except for the lumber, which was cut near the settlement. A carpenter, a member of the cooperative was paid to build the *galerón* and some women were paid a small salary for carrying the materials from the shore to the construction site. The UNHCR technician provided a design for the building. Every once in a while Teresa, chosen as the head of the women's group, went to inspect the work in progress, although she was not asked her opinion of the project either by the carpenter or the technician.

At the beginning of May, 130 chickens were brought to San Mariano from Orinoco and the Kama River. Sixteen of them died after only a few days. According to Teresa, this was due to the trip and imprisonment in the *galerón*. During the months that followed, the number of chickens remained more or less constant. Although many chicks were born, many adults died of diseases and their inability to adapt to the new environment.

Then problems increased. There was a shortage of food (corn and rice) for the birds, because of poor harvests. The chickens became ill and eggs had to be sold to buy medicine for them. Some of the women abandoned the project because it was failing; neither the UNHCR technician nor any other specialist in chicken breeding was available after the construction had been completed or when problems began. For Teresa, who did not have the knowledge or experience to breed chickens this way, the project became a continuous "headache."

A year later, it was decided to abandon the *galerón* and distribute the remaining chickens among the women who had participated in the project. To the women, it was now clear that the chicken would be healthier and produce better if they were allowed to run free. At the same time, each household would be able to manage the animals according to availability of food. The *galerón* was cleaned and turned into a school. The original school building was turned into a youth centre. The community development project, initiated without consulting its potential beneficiaries, had been transformed into a series of other projects. The participating women were each a dozen chickens and an experience richer and the settlement gained a school. The original project goals were not achieved, but the women managed to solve the emerging problems.

The second project involved buying 32 head of cattle (30 young cows and 2 bulls) in the Fifth Region with the goal of satisfying the demand for milk by children, although the adults would also be pleased to drink it, as Bernardo eagerly admitted, "Because to eat only rice and beans and work is very *triste* [sad]." The cooperative would be responsible for the project and the cows would be communal property. The milk was to be distributed according to the number of children in each household. At the end of May 1989, the animals were brought to San Mariano and placed in a newly fenced area of about 40 ha of pasture, part of the 100 ha mentioned earlier. Some of the cows were Pardo-Swiss, although the majority were Brahaman. The election results had influenced the purchase of the cattle. The big cattle breeders were only willing to sell second-grade cows because the new UNO government had promised to encourage the production of meat and milk through better prices, credit, and market facilities.

After a month, the first disputes about the distribution of milk arose, some households claiming they did not receive the right amount. Several meetings were held in which this problem was discussed, and finally an agreement was reached which stated that each household would be "given" two cows to take care of. Bernardo and Teresa received two cows, as did fourteen other families (the bulls remained in the hands of the cooperative). Some households were excluded on the ground that they had not taken care of the cattle. It was also decided that new animals would stay with the households into which they were born.

For about a year, no major problems occurred; the herd increased considerably and all beneficiaries were happy with the milk production. In August 1991, a new conflict arose when one of the members of the cooperative announced that he was going to sell his two cows because he planned to return to Punta Gorda.

Teresa contested this plan. She argued that the man did not have the right to sell the two cows because they were not his personal property but the cooperative's. She interpreted the decision of the previous year as meaning that the households that had received two cows had the right of use, but could not sell them. The problem was discussed in a meeting, in which the man who wanted to move was supported by Francisco, at that time the president of the cooperative. They overruled Teresa. Francisco's personal interest in the affair was a crucial factor: he wanted to buy the cows. In a conversation we had with Teresa after this, she commented bitterly on the manipulation of cooperative rules by Francisco, who she claimed abused his position for personal benefits. At the same time, she criticised the other members of the cooperative who had not protested the decision, being afraid of possible repercussions from Francisco.

The 1990 elections

To conclude this case study, I will briefly discuss one last issue that had an impact on the life of the family: the 1990 elections, which turned the political landscape upside down (I will turn to this in Chapter 4). Bernardo and Teresa both participated actively in the election process. This included taking part in a three-day seminar in Bluefields about voting procedures (during which they could not work).

Bernardo was elected as amanuensis for the election table in San Mariano; in the 1984 elections he had been the president of the table in Punta Gorda. Thus, this political process and events reached even the most remote areas of Nicaragua. Bernardo and Teresa, like so many others, never expected the FSLN to be defeated. Participating in a panel organized by the local radio station, they predicted a 70% victory for the FSLN. They passed the first days after the election *desconsolados*, in distress. Teresa said:

> With the results of the election we felt sad. But the people here they said, "Well, now we go for doña Violeta, before we went for Daniel, now it is with la Violeta." They are not afraid and they are not disappointed. We had some troubles with the people from the other side [San Nicolas]. They are UNO people, they told us that the cooperative will be dissolved. No fights, just words. These people they always keep away from us. They have their own transport and they never want to carry us to Bluefields. Bernardo and Francisco, who are the FSLN militants of San Mariano were very disappointed. They met with the members of the [FSLN] base committee. Right now, we will see what is going to happen.

The change of government brought some uncertain months for members of the cooperative about the legal status of the organization and future of the plantation. This situation was aggravated by the actions of the former owner of the San Mariano lands, Elmer Jackson who had become the new regional director of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. Jackson attempted to get back the property that he had lost to the bank ten years before due to outstanding debts. Threatening the cooperative with confiscation of the plantation and trying to use his newly acquired political influence, his moves and manoeuvres caused many sleepless nights for Bernardo, Teresa, and other members. Faced with this threat, they mobilized their own resources and networks to protect what they considered theirs; they denounced the threats on the local radio ("we will not hand over the land to anybody!": Francisco) and asked the UNAG for legal and political support. Francisco went to Managua to find out about the legal status of the cooperative, returning with the good news that the title was officially registered and that legally there was no reason to worry. Thus political and economic changes following the election, some set in motion in Managua, some in Bluefields, were leaving no one untouched.

Conclusion

The three case studies demonstrate the different ways in which enterprises in the hinterland try to organize their day-to-day survival. They show that living and working conditions in the area are extremely hard. The historical isolation of the Atlantic Coast, the ecology of the (damaged) tropical rainforest, the upheavals of the Contra war and hurricane Joan, and the economic crisis have produced recurring ruptures in the lives of the people. Facing these ruptures, each enterprise

tries one way or another to optimize available resources resulting in diversified productive activities. Household units aim to guarantee basic consumption needs **and** a (minimum) monetary income. However, the degree to which these objectives are achieved varies significantly.

The case of Angela and Guillermo is an example of relative success in satisfying basic needs, based on the intensive use of family labour, placing value on hard work, agricultural craftsmanship, and the development of diversified commercial activities. José and Lorenza, making use of strategic social relations and involvement in the UNAG, have managed to set up a medium-sized farm, but costs have been high. In many cases, basic needs are not satisfied, as the story of Teresa and Bernardo shows. As labourers and farmers, members of a cooperative, and beneficiaries of the agrarian reform policy and "development projects," they continue to balance on the string of survival waiting for better times. Although all three cases are examples of family-run enterprises, they show that both internal and external relations of production vary, in time and space. Moreover, tensions, conflicts and divisions — due to generational and/or gender relations — within each unit are often sharp. They lead to continuous negotiations between the different sexes and between parents and children.

Diversification is one answer to the uncertainties of farming in the area. The different production practices that we have encountered include agriculture, livestock, charcoal production, extraction of firewood and precious lumber, fishing, hunting, and various forms of commerce. Both commoditized and non-commoditized relations continue to play a role of importance. We have found a wide range of forms and degrees of both kinds of relations, whose particular mix at household level vary according to geographical location of the farm, ecological conditions, social network, and political ties. Moreover, mixes are modified over time as both household composition and situation and the wider economic and political context change. Non-commoditized relations are maintained as elements of people's struggles with new and often unforeseen circumstances (discontinuities). Year after year, men and women engage in partnerships, *mano vuelta* systems, *compadrazgo* ties, cooperatives, church committees, women's groups, and the UNAG to secure access to vital resources, defend economic interests, develop and share common cultural values and social identities. At the same time, it is through these key institutions — which are redefined over time, as the cases reveal — that we can decipher people's political fights.

Production of plants and seeds and the breeding of domestic animals takes place mainly at the farm and "community" levels, and exchange of produce and knowledge accumulated through experimenting has, in general, a non-commoditized character. Relations with institutions that are supposed to provide technical assistance are not very frequent, although some farmers have contacts with agricultural research centres in the Pacific, where they obtain seeds to use in experiments. New and improved varieties of basic grains are sporadically provided through credit programs of the National Development Bank and distribution channels of the UNAG, but access to these seeds is limited. Basic tools are bought in the town of Bluefields, especially at the farmer's cooperative shop, ECODEPA.

Labour relations, based on family, friendship, and *compadrazgo* ties, are most often rewarded in a non-monetary form. In contrast with other regions in the country, rural households in the hinterland do not maintain regular external monetary labour relations. This can be attributed to the lack of opportunities for work as a (temporary) salaried labourer, i.e., the low demand for labour. In the region there is only one employer: the sugar mill of Kukra Hill, which requires a seasonal workforce to harvest the sugarcane. However, the working conditions there are extremely hard and wages very low. An exception are the relations between cattle farmers and their *mandadores*/workers, and the relations between the coconut cooperative members of San Mariano and the state enterprise La Cocotera. In the latter case, however, we have seen that the members have contested these conditions. Influenced by a change in the overall agrarian policy, their proletarianization has been offset. Cultural values informed by gender, most visibly in the ideology of machismo, continue to structure the sexual division of labour and the unequal rewards that come with it. However, the cases show that the last word has not been said and that piecemeal changes are expected and being fought for.

We have seen that all units maintain market relations, although frequently of a very irregular and uncertain character. We can distinguish different kinds of relations, which in all cases are restricted to the regional level. Produce is sold directly to consumers at the producers' homes in Bluefields, at the market, or on the streets; to shops (*ventecitas* or ECODEPA); to wholesalers; or to retailers. Sometimes, products are exchanged for other goods instead of sold. We have seen that households that live relatively close to town have an advantage over the ones that find themselves at the centre or borders of the hinterland, as transportation facilities are deficient.

A crucial role is played by charcoal production, for many enterprises the most important means of obtaining an income. Prices for farm products are established through negotiations, but margins are restricted by price indicators fixed by the state (both Sandinist and UNO-governments), as I will discuss in more detail in Part II). Moreover, room to manoeuvre is limited by the limitation on the amount of time spent in town and/or by dependence on transport facilities. Both factors negatively influence the establishment of social relations that could improve market options. Once more, gender informs market ties. As the story of Elba Chow illustrated, men in general control what, when, and to whom products are sold. They also define where the money obtained from transactions is spent. However, this situation is contested, as Angela, Teresa, and the same Elba show.

Regarding the impact of the agrarian policies, we can conclude that, in general, it has been limited. State institutions such as the Ministries of Agriculture and Livestock, and of Agrarian Reform have offices in the town of Bluefields, but their direct positive effects in the area and the realization of policy, plans, and programs are minimal. The Bluefields hinterland, despite its important role as an agricultural frontier and the problems related to the destruction of the tropical forest, is not a priority in terms of agrarian policy. Even in the case of the coconut palm plantation of San Mariano (part of the large-scale agroindustrial development projects for the coast of the former Sandinist government), we have seen that little attention or

follow-up is given to its development. Of course, the war, economic crisis, and Joan did little to help the situation. The idea of state-controlled and centralized commercialization of coconuts has become meaningless, as each cooperative member is forced to sell his or her fruits where there is demand and according to their own needs and capacities. Direct influence of the state on agriculture is exercised mainly through credit programs oriented toward the production of a surplus of basic grains or the expansion of livestock, but the number of beneficiaries is small and the cultivation of these crops and the breeding of cows are fraught with difficulties. The Sandinist government, through ENABAS and the Ministry of the Interior tried both to stimulate and control the commercialization of basic products, but their impact on the rural coastal areas has been minimal. In short, the transformation of means of production has remained a slow and difficult process.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on data and analyses presented in Tijerino and Vernooy 1990, 1991c: 195-246.

2. Comparing the Atlantic Coast with the Pacific region we find some clear differences. The latter was colonized by the Spanish and lands were used for cattle and coffee haciendas (under the influence of German immigrants). This transformation was accompanied by *patron-mozo* relations that continue to have a strong influence in the rural areas of the Pacific. During the Somoza regime, beginning at the end of World War II, a cotton boom took place, especially in the western departments. This boom left thousands of peasants without land or with the most marginal lands as they were forced by the large landowners (protected by the National Guard) to move to other areas or to become salaried workers on the cotton haciendas. This caused the exodus of small peasants to the eastern region of the country where they opened up new agricultural frontiers in the mountains of the central and northern departments and in the tropical forests of the Atlantic Coast (the "*frontera agricola*", Wheelock 1985b; Serra 1991). Hence, in the Pacific strong relations between the peasant and capitalist sectors developed in the form of direct relations between *patron-mozo* and seasonal relations as peasant families migrated from one rural zone to another to pick coffee or cotton for a few months a year to obtain money.

Turning our attention eastward, a comparison with peasantries in the Caribbean can be made. Here many different forms of rural economies arose, in which agrarian self-sufficiency is combined with an articulation with the market system. According to Mintz (1974, 1985), these can be seen as "reconstituted peasantries," of people who began as slaves, deserters, or plantation workers, who became peasants in response to the externally imposed system, i.e., the plantation regime that could be found all over the Caribbean (Mintz 1974: 132). Specific forms of peasant production developed, as a mode of response to the dominant production regime and imposed styles of life (ibid: 133), as a way to resist a system designed to destroy their identity as human beings (ibid: 156). Among these peasants were squatters to be found on Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic) who were deserters, or escaped slaves from other islands, freemen of colour seeking to detach themselves from government surveillance and control; yeomen on the islands of the Lesser Antilles, who were former indentured labourers; so called "proto-peasants," slaves who became peasants because of emancipation (Jamaica) or revolution (Haiti); and "runaway-peasants" who were escaping slaves who created maroon communities (Jamaica and Surinam) (ibid: 147-154).

3. One has to guess whether the lack of attention to the coast is based on ignorance or innocence as most authors simply do not speak at all about the coastal economy as part of the national economic system. For example, in his book on ten years of Sandinist agrarian policy, Wheelock (1990), ex-minister of agriculture, only mentions the Atlantic Coast twice, pointing out that the indigenous groups received land titles for their communal lands.

4. To mention an example of the impact of nature: inundations are a frequent event in the region. On 29 September 1990, the waters of the Río Grande flooded 16 communities and material damage was great (*La Barricada*, 29 September 1990). On 23 July 1991, the town of El Rama and dispersed settlements along the Escondido River were affected by the rising water level, which led to the evacuation of thousands of people and the loss of houses, farms, belongings, harvests, and cattle (*La Barricada*, 25 July 1991).

5. For a more detailed discussion, see the excellent book by Hecht and Cockburn 1991; see also, Partridge 1989: 3-19 and Jones 1990: 120-141.

6. This is a debated issue as I discussed in the previous chapter. Experiments with agroforestry and silvo-pastoral practices in other countries (for example in neighbouring Costa Rica) show that more viable and rentable alternatives could be developed. See Budowski 1985; Geilfus 1989.

7. In August and September 1990, the whole region was struck by an epidemic of measles. Although considered a non-mortal disease it caused the death of dozens of people in several remote places and dispersed settlements. For example, along the Mahogany River, 36 cases were reported (*La Barricada*, 29 September 1990), due to unhygienic conditions and the lack of basic medicines and facilities to treat patients.

8. Given the problems of providing rural areas with basic products at regular prices, a historical problem in Nicaragua, the UNAG initiated a large-scale project to create a national network of "*tiendas campesinas*," under the management of the Empresa Cooperativa de Productores Agropecuarios (ECODEPA). The project received financing from the Swedish government, Oxfam UK and USA, and, in the case of the Bluefields region, from HIVOS, a Dutch non-governmental organization. In Bluefields, ECODEPA was established in 1988, but due to the hurricane in October that year, operations closed down. A new start was made in June 1989 and there are now ten *tiendas campesinas* in the region, which function with variable success.

9. In selecting the enterprises, we received the help of the former president of the UNAG-Bluefields. For a first account of these cases, see Tijerino and Vernooy 1991c: 195-246. During the research two additional case studies of rural enterprises were elaborated by Hofstede and van Leeuwen (1991). These studies focused on farmers who wanted to introduce agroforestry practices as an viable economic and ecological alternative for agriculture in the hinterland (see also Pelletier 1991).

10. Angela and Guillermo's children are 25, 23, 22, 20, 19, 18, 16, 15, 14, 12, 11, 7, 5, and 4 years old. The 18, 14, and 12 year olds go to school in Bluefields. The others, with the exception of the two youngest and the 15 year old (she tried several times to attend classes, but could not stand school at all), have some basic knowledge of writing and reading. The 4 year old girl is the child of Angela's sister who has been adopted by the family. Two other children died at a very young age.

11. It is important to note that the concept of "community" (in Spanish, *la comunidad*) has many different and sometimes conflicting meanings. Locally, people use this concept not so much to refer to a determined physical centre, but to the people that live along the shores of a creek or river. But because a river may be quite long, people might include some inhabitant and exclude others. Inclusion may also be based on social relations.

12. Both cultivate their "own" parcels and make their "own" charcoal. Part of the harvest/production of Roberto is pooled within the household, the other part he sells. Guillermo is also keen to "hand out" (temporary) parcels to his other sons in case they come to work on the farm, as for example in the 1991-92 cycle. Thus, he teaches his sons farming practices. At the same time, it is a way to secure continuation of the enterprise by binding family labour to the farm (for similar accounts among farmers in the Lower Languedoc in France, see Lem 1988: 513-516).

13. Although the Ministry of Labour has fixed official salaries for one day of farm work, remunerations are usually negotiated between employers and employees. Therefore, I would argue that the value calculated is not determined by the (open) labour market and (free) mobility of labour. This is basically due to the fact that rural paid labour is a rather rare phenomenon in the hinterland. Perhaps we should turn the argument around and say that

these negotiations actually constitute "the market," a market however, of a very fragmented nature whose rules are constantly being renegotiated.

14. This is due to the cutting of the forest that disrupts the nutrient cycle and leads to leaching in rains and storms. The soils become compacted (hot, dry conditions during the dry season create a landscape of soil fissures), more and more inaccessible to germinating seedlings, and in some cases almost anaerobic. If no new plants are sown or naturally regenerated — impossible when cattle occupy the land and regular burning takes place — the ecosystem rapidly degrades. Moreover, the biological elements that would permit recovery are destroyed (for a more detailed discussion, see: Budowski 1985; Hecht and Cockburn 1989).

15. This interview was recorded by Nicole Pelletier. CATIE is a well-known research and training centre specializing in tropical agriculture, livestock, and forestry. Its headquarters are in Costa Rica.

16. This cocopalm project was initiated in 1982 on 220 ha of hybrid trees in El Cocal in San Juan del Norte, an old plantation where, in the 1960s, 600 ha of the Jamaican variety of cocopalms were established by the Brautigan family. In 1984 and 1985, the project was extended to Punta Gorda where 390 ha were planted; in 1985 and 1986 to San Mariano with 278 ha and Deer Island (on land belonging to the Ramas) with 18 ha. Because of Contra attacks, El Cocal was abandoned in May 1983, followed three years later by Punta Gorda (MIDINRA Zona Especial II 1986).

17. The director of the enterprise stated that this was due to the "fact" that the people from San Mariano concentrate on subsistence agriculture. Here we see how the mechanism of functional dualism (de Janvry, 1981) is cemented in a conscious attempt to proletarianize the labour force.

18. One child was born during the fieldwork, in January 1991. The youngest was born in January 1992.

19. In 1982, they went from Punta Gorda to a temporary refugee camp in Atlanta, then to the Barra of Punta Gorda, from there to Monte Creek, and after two years back to the Barra of Punta Gorda, followed, in 1985, by Barcelona and San Mariano. Tents of plastic became almost like a symbol for their exodus, as is vividly described by Alberto, another member of the cooperative:

> We have a long experience of going from one place to another and living in small plastic houses. This is a vivid experience for us, the group of 18 families involved. From all the places that we were evacuated we started with living and sleeping in small plastic houses. Later we built houses, but all the time we had to leave them behind and to go to the next place.

In the same interview, he called the experience a "project of poverty and disasters" in which they were left behind naked. In the case of the children, who lost their napkins during the evacuation over rivers and ocean, he meant it literally. Fortunately, nobody died although many got sick and the children, women, and older people suffered a lot.

20. Of course, the radio is also a source of entertainment. Besides music which the children adore, the local radio station transmits the baseball games of the coastal team, which nobody wants to miss. Sometimes a quiz is organized in which everybody can participate much to the pleasure of the family. They won a prize in one of these quizzes by listing as many different fruits grown in Nicaragua as possible. It came to 87!

21. Table 1. Salary of Bernardo at the "Cocotera-enterprise" (April 1989-February 1990).

Month	Salary in $US
April 1989	15.92
May	16.92
June	—
July	—
August	0.46
September	2.49
October	—
November	—
December	3.96
January 1990	14.17
February	1.03

Source: "Enrique Campbell" coco-palm enterprise, Bluefields.

22. In February 1991, the cooperative applied for credit to sow basic grains in the *postrera*. Although the bank was willing to lend the money, approval was blocked by the head of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Elmer Jackson. Decisions on the provision of credit are made by a loan committee on which the BND, MAG, and UNAG have a seat. Approvals of loans are made by consensus. According to Bernardo, the personal interests of Jackson were behind this affair: "He hopes that the people from San Mariano will leave in desperation." But, as he firmly continued, "Although the situation is bad, the people are not going to obey. We have held on so far and we will not give up. It's better we are going to fight once more with the bank."

23. Because of the active of role of Francisco in the UNAG and FSLN (he spends a few days a week in Bluefields) contacts with representatives of NGOs are relatively easily established. This, and the recognized great need of the people of San Mariano were the main factors in obtaining the projects of DIAKONIA.

PART II
DOING BUSINESS IN TOWN

4. "FREE TRADE IS ONE THING AND CONTROL ANOTHER...": THE DYNAMICS AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THE REGULATION OF PRICES IN BLUEFIELDS

> The very close historical links between rulers and traders (whether of complicity or antagonism) might partly stem from both parties being claimants for the key role in the social regulation of demand. The politics of demand frequently lies at the root of the tension between merchants and political elites; whereas merchants tend to be the social representatives of unfettered equivalence, new commodities, and strange tastes, political elites tend to be the custodians of restricted exchange, fixed commodity systems, and established tastes and sumptuary customs (Appadurai 1986: 33).

To regulate or to be regulated

One of our research goals was to provide a better understanding of the dynamics and complexities of policymaking processes on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. Using an actor-oriented approach, this implies analyzing the different ways in which people interact in constructing plans or measures. This not only requires an analysis of how policies limit the access of men and women to vital resources, but also of the ways people develop to defend or advance their own interests by increasing their access to these resources. In other words, it involves an examination of the meaning and consequences that policy has for the livelihood practices that people try to accomplish.

Having analyzed the reconstruction program (Chapter 2), in this chapter I will present a second case of the social construction of a particular policy measure at the regional level. This measure aimed to regulate the prices of basic goods through a special commission created by the regional autonomous government of the Bluefields region. Placing this particular policy measure at the regional level, in light of the structural adjustment plan of Nicaragua's central UNO government, we must look critically at liberalization discourses and practices.[1] This will show us that people actively transform the Nicaraguan political economy. It will also point out the fundamental contradiction underlying the attempt to regulate a so-called free market.

The price-control measure was an initiative of the UNO in the region of Bluefields, which, from May 1990, was the centre for directing the autonomy process in the Southern Autonomous Atlantic Region. Established in April 1991, the price commission was the result of emerging local conflict about prices of basic food products. This conflict arose when merchants in Bluefields continued increasing prices despite a new national plan announced by government of Violeta

Barrios de Chamorro, which was elected in February 1990. The plan was supposed to contribute to the solution of the economic crisis; a halt to price increases and speculation was an important factor.

I will look at the reasons given by members of the regional government and price commission for the implementation of this measure. In doing so, I will discuss the debate about which political economy model is the most adequate for solving the economic crisis of Nicaragua. At stake here is state control of economic life, on the one hand, and survival practices of small- scale traders, their ideas, interests, and alliances, on the other. I will also analyze the ways in which different social actors mobilized resources to negotiate specific interests, exercise pressure on other "parties," or sanction people who did not want to follow their rules. This includes looking at the role of the price-control inspectors appointed by the commission. I will then place the price-control issue within the wider context of the power relations and struggles for political influence and control.

I do this by taking into account the relatively small dimensions of the local political scenery as conditioned by the region's history and limited role in the revolution, the geographic isolation of the area, and the restricted economic resources that all contribute to the "village" character of Bluefields, where everyone knows everyone else and maintaining good relations is of vital importance in getting things done. However, before presenting the case study in more detail, I will give an overview of the changes that are taking place as a result of the national elections of February 1990. These changes provide the background for an understanding of regional events and their dialectic links with national circumstances.

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to articles from the coastal weekly newspaper *La Información* (1917-1979) concerning price-control issues, which show us that (the lack of) regulation is a recurring question on the Atlantic Coast.

"The UNO can make it!": election winners and losers and the question of what is going to happen

On 26 February 1990, one day after the elections, the streets of Bluefields were completely abandoned. It seemed that everyone — UNO and FSLN voters alike — had decided to stay inside to recover from the shock of the results that for so many came as a big surprise. At national and regional levels, the UNO had defeated the FSLN.[2] Over the next few days, life in town slowly returned to normal. The question that everywhere could be heard was: "What is going to happen right now?"

The Sandinist cadres, once they had recovered, were among the first to give an answer. They declared that from now on they would "*gobernar desde abajo*" or "govern from below" to defend the transformations of ten years of revolution. In an emotional speech in Bluefields, Ray Hooker, FSLN regional delegate in the National Assembly and one of the main advocates of the autonomy project, explained what was meant by this rather demagogic slogan (1 March 1990, at the FSLN Regional Committee office in Bluefields):

> *Hermanos*, we will hand over the government, but the power we can not hand over, because the power belongs to the people. We will never allow that the Ministry of Internal Affairs will be destroyed!... The new government will also try to destroy COMABLUSA [the regional lumber company], to privatize or to sell it to some of its followers. But we will not allow this. Never, never, never! *Hermanos*, they will try to privatize the fishing companies. Companies that belong to our patrimony. We will not allow that they privatize PESCASA or PROMAR to private entrepreneurs. We will not allow this! From all the trenches, from below, from all corners we will fight from below and we will govern from below to protect the grand revolutionary conquests and in the next elections we will triumph!

Ray Hooker clearly enunciated, once more, the central questions that were at stake for the Nicaraguan people in general and the *costeños* in particular. The tone of his speech indicated the enormous shock the Sandinist leaders were attempting to overcome as they realized that they had not only lost the election, but also contact with "the people," which in the end (or maybe better, the beginning) had placed them where they were.

"Now we go with Violeta, before we went with Daniel." This was the simple conclusion drawn by a coastal farmer when results of the election were confirmed. A **simple** conclusion in the sense that the main reasons the majority of the Nicaraguans voted for this change were far from complex: a desire for peace and the hope that, with the UNO, the economic crisis would come to an end.

The FSLN leaders who interpreted the choice of the people as a mistake or as betrayal did not, or did not want, to understand this logic. By voting for "la Violeta," the people expected the Contra war and its horrors to end. If the FSLN stayed in power, the war would continue for an indefinite period causing more destruction, deaths, insecurity, and, worst of all, obliged military service. Economically, they hoped that the UNO "could make it" as its campaign slogan stated (Keulen 1990; ENVIO, April 1990: 26-27; Vargas 1991: 71-73; Vilas 1990a: 11-13).

However, other factors also played a role: the bureaucratic and vertical operating style of the FSLN, the identification of the party with the state apparatus, and the imposition of power by party members on regional and local power structures (Mendoza 1990: 19-51). Closely related to these factors was a critique of the simplistic analysis of social reality by FSLN leaders implicit in their assumption that the people would vote first of all on ideological grounds rather than on concrete material needs. The party, forced to face the new situation and counting on its still considerable support, decided to start its own evaluation process of the defeat. A debate was opened in which the past and future of the revolution and FSLN were discussed, with a view to the 1996 election.

With uncertainty about new political and economic directions, confusion among the Sandinists, and the return to everyday life in the streets, market places, factories, and offices, negotiations were started between the UNO and the FSLN about the transition of government. This transition occurred between 26 February and 25 April 1990, at which time the new government officially took up its position.

It was based on an agreement between the UNO and FSLN to **negotiate** instead of fight about the future of the country and solutions to the many problems that it confronted.

At the same time, in Bluefields, members of the regional UNO made their first declarations about issues concerning the region. They promised that the projects financed by the Cuban government (construction of houses and a brigade of doctors) would continue and that efforts would be made to look for other development programs for the coast. Concerning the future of the lumber and fishing companies in the region, they declared that the management of these enterprises would probably be directed from Managua. Whether this meant privatization was left unanswered.

The economic stabilization plan: 1990-1993

> We will reconstruct our economy using the most powerful instrument that exists to liberate the creative energy of the people: we will make use of freedom.... My government will protect the most weak and vulnerable sectors: orphans, widows, the aged and war cripples.... We will democratically reform the labour legislation and guarantee to all Nicaraguans a fair salary...
> (*La Prensa*, 25 April 1990)

With these promises, Violeta Barrios accepted the presidency. In her first public discourse, she outlined four major tasks: consolidation of democratic liberties; maximum economic production; reduction of social inequalities; and infusing all action with the spirit of reconciliation. In the weeks after the change of government it became clear that economic tasks were going to be the most important ones.

To achieve maximum economic production, the government launched the first phase of a so-called "stabilization and adjustment plan." This plan was very much of a neo-liberal character, serving the economic interests of capitalist enterprises, but coordinated and to a significant degree executed by the state. Its goals were the reactivation of the economy, especially of the export sector, and reintegration of the national economy into the world market. A monetary reform — gradual introduction of a new currency, the "golden cordoba" with a value equal to one US dollar — in combination with strict control of the fiscal deficit and salaries, formed the core of the plan. Its first goal was to stop within 100 days the hyper-inflation that for years had made economic planning and administration almost impossible.

The "Mayorga plan," named after the newly appointed director of the central bank, announced concrete measures to achieve this goal. In April and May 1990, the government executed a series of maxi-devaluations and an increase of interest rates on loans; as compensation it augmented salaries by 60%. It also suspended the Law of Civil Service and froze the collective agreements of state employees. Simultaneously, it began revision of the laws approved by the Sandinists during the

transition period through the proclamation of decree 10-90, "Provisional renting of lands" and 11-90, "Revision of confiscations."[3] Both these decrees were to facilitate the privatization of state enterprises and state-owned lands. This was one of the main strategies of the government to let free capitalist market forces regulate the national economy while the state guaranteed social order and an "appropriate" judicial framework (ENVIO, August-September 1990: 14-24).

Time after time the UNO ministers pointed out that this combination of measures would lead to the modernization of the country, meaning prosperity and luck. However, what it meant to the everyday lives of the people became clear in the following months when pro-Sandinist labour unions organized a series of strikes to demand salary increases, restoration of the Law of Civil Service, and annulment of the new decrees. This conflict escalated in violent confrontations that made world news in June 1990 (several people were killed and many were wounded).

These events led finally to negotiations and signing of an agreement between the government and unions, putting an end to the strikes and the first serious post-electoral confrontation of political forces in the country. The "Mayorga plan" was revised.[4] To take into account specific demands of the workers and their unions, new negotiations were initiated in September when the president announced the beginning of a national process of *concertación*. Ten days earlier, the director of the central bank had openly admitted that his plan had failed. He agreed that state expenses had remained too high (and the deficit too large) and external funds were insufficient to fill the gaps.

The escalation of violence clearly showed the limited room for economic adjustment. At the same time, it showed the people's willingness to defend the small space left for survival. In other words, people were not passively waiting to see the economy adjusted, liberalized, and regulated. The negotiations for the process of *concertación* (from the verb *concertar*, to harmonize, to come to an agreement), began in October 1990 with participation of the government, main labour unions, and the principal organization of entrepreneurs (COSEP). This time the government entered the discussion with a fatalistic approach, in sharp contrast to the Mayorga plan, preparing the people for worse things to come.

In Bluefields in the meantime, all the crucial problems remained unresolved. The future of the fishing and lumber companies continued to be uncertain. During the first week of September, workers of COMABLUSA, the main lumber company, pointed out that the company was one month behind in paying salaries due to a lack of working capital. On another front, the regional president of the national farmers' union (UNAG) asked for remission of the debts of producers in the region, since their economic situation was becoming unbearable. On 1 October, workers of the PICSA fishing company occupied the plant and refused entry to the director.

No plans to improve economic conditions were presented by the regional government. In the last week of September, the regional government and assembly suffered a fierce political attack. The newly created National Institute for the Development of the Autonomous Regions (INDERA, the equivalent of a ministry), headed by the controversial miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera, opened a regional

office in Bluefields. The regional authorities did not hide their disagreement with INDERA, whose creation they considered a violation of the autonomy law. An attempt by the institute's regional director to speak in the Regional Assembly was prevented. The Assembly unanimously agreed that it did not want any contact with INDERA.[5] From that moment on, INDERA was treated with suspicion by both the government and assembly leading to an increase in frictions in town and between Bluefields and Managua.

Then, on 30 October 1990, the conflict caused by the negotiations about *concertación* reached a new height when groups of ex-Contras took possession of the road from Managua to Rama, the main east-west route, thus cutting Bluefields off from the rest of the country.[6] They demanded that the government fulfill its promises to the ex-Contras made during the discussions about disarmament and reintegration into society, providing them land, food, health, and education services. Moreover, they pressed the government to start immediately disarming civilians and to replace "Sandinist" ministers and Humberto Ortega, the head of the army (*La Barricada*, 2 November 1990).

A few days later, the inhabitants of Bluefields, already seriously affected by what was going on in the Fifth Region, were shocked by another event. A group of 50 ex-Contras and UNO sympathizers occupied the offices in the town hall and the regional radio and television stations "in solidarity with the ex-Contras who barricaded the Managua-Rama road," according to one of their leaders. They asked for land, food, tools, and houses, the disarming of the regional cooperatives, and removal of the governor, the heads of the regional police and navy-brigade, and of several other "Sandinist" officers (*La Prensa*, 7 November 1990).

Confronted with this situation, the regional government decided to create a commission to discuss the demands of the group. With mediation by some of the city's religious leaders, the conflict was finally resolved through peaceful negotiation. An agreement was signed to "look for peace, extend regional autonomy, and adopt more realistic development programs for our region" (*La Barricada*, 10 November 1990). Specifically, the document stated, among other things, that the regional direction of ministries would be revised, two radio stations would be created (one for the UNO, the other for the FSLN), and the regional government would direct the Bluefields television station.

Two other solutions were proposed, that merit our attention because of their political relevance: INPESCA was summoned to stop giving out fishing permits to foreign boats and to pay taxes to the regional government, and the latter promised to do everything possible to obtain the dissolution of INDERA.[7]

In other parts of the country, conflicts were finally "resolved" through the intervention of police and army troops. In these clashes four policemen were killed and several wounded.

One month later, following the abovementioned agreements, the regional assembly discussed once more the position of INDERA. Within the UNO faction, no agreement was reached, some joining the FSLN branch in boycotting INDERA, others in favour of cooperating with the institute. In February 1991, representatives of the autonomous governments met with national government members in

Managua to discuss the serious problems on the coast and the contested creation of INDERA, and to demand respect for the autonomy law (*La Barricada*, 9 February 1991). The meeting ended without concrete results.

Hence, *concertación* turned out to be much more complicated and violent than had been foreseen by the government as unfulfilled electoral promises accumulated, and people saw increasingly fewer ways out of their misery and poverty. Conflicts and contradictions continued. As ENVIO observed: "This year has been anarchic, with central government ministries, and, reportedly, both regional coordinators negotiating contracts for fishing and lumber rights with no coordination, common criteria, or financial accountability" (July 1991: 29).[8]

This summary of confrontations and negotiations that marked the post-election period brings us to our case study. As we will see, on the one hand the evolution of this case reflects certain characteristics of the preceding events. On the other hand, it highlights the specific nature of the regional situation and the state of political relations.

The price regulation commission in the town of Bluefields

> Alright, we check that they cannot establish whatever price they want, because free trade is one thing and control another.... We are not prohibiting somebody from selling products, but at the same time we have to protect the salaries of the people. Because the salaries are low and it is not the small shop-owner who enriches himself. It is among the wholesale dealers that you find some sharks. We know that they buy things cheaper than the prices they actually establish!
> (**Head** of the UNO branch in the regional assembly and member of the price regulation commission in an interview on 26 April 1991)

> I would like to tell you that our president has announced that we have free trade in Nicaragua. Everyone can set up a business and do whatever he wants. However, although in the United States of America and Europe there also exists free trade, prices are regulated. When we say free, this doesn't mean that you can sell things at the price you like. When you tell me, "but there exists free trade, I can sell this glass for $100!" that is not possible. It cost you so much time to make that glass and you invest 60 cents to make it. Well, you have the right to make so much money for the time that you spend and so much money for the investments that you made. Even though you have a free and democratic country, whatsoever, you always have an office or institution of regulation for anything.
> (**Assistant** of the regional government's executive and member of the price regulation commission)[9]

The price regulation commission was appointed to solve an emerging conflict in the region about the prices of basic products, commonly known as the *canasta básica* or basic basket. The conflict arose when merchants again raised the prices of basic goods, despite implementation of the new economic stabilization and

adjustment plan (see below). The price increases for meat, fruits, and vegetables caused widespread discontent among the people of Bluefields who loudly criticised the regional government. In response, the government announced the establishment of a price commission and described its general objectives on the local radio stations. Only during the following weeks, when the measure had become accepted, were the ideas behind the policy explained in more detail and reasons given.

In the following sections, I will follow the dynamic of this policy process by documenting actions and reactions of some of the principal actors involved. This directs us to examine the different meanings that the price regulation acquired in various social contexts by following the day-to-day events. At the same time, I will "reconstruct" the significance of the measure by interviewing these actors about their ideas, interests, and acceptance or rejection of the policy. In doing so, I will discuss the legitimizing norms and values that were formulated by members of the regional government and the price regulation commission. As the above-cited statements demonstrate, arguments had to do with the model that the government should implement to solve the economic crisis.

In more-or-less explicit terms, both in public discourse and during our interviews, two alternatives were discussed. The first, "free trade," is based on the idea that supply and demand (Adam Smith's "invisible hand") regulate economic activity and that the state should not intervene. In this simple form, free trade has become one of the most important political slogans of the UNO-government at the national level. The second alternative is that regulated trade becomes a strategic tool of the state operating directly or indirectly as an economic agent. This model in its purest form has been one of the pillars of Sandinist economic policy.

Traders from Corn Island fined for changing prices
Bluefields, 19 November 1943
Mr Police Agent, Corn Island

Dear sir:
I am informing you that this Board of Price and Trade Control has fined several traders on this island because they are selling items at excessive prices. In what follows I will specify these fines: Lon Joy, because he sells kerosine at C$1.50 a litre: C$200; Yuen Sing, for selling rice at C$0.45 and butter at C$3.50 a pound: C$200; Alejandro Downs, for selling nails at C$3.50 a pound, cigarettes "Virginia" at C$0.80 and corn at C$0.28 a pound: C$200; Son Hay, for selling rice at C$0.46 a pound, beans at C$0.47 a pound and flour at C$0.43 a pound: C$200; Lock Siu, for selling butter at C$3.50 a pound and kerosene at C$1.25 a litre: C$200. The fined merchants should pay their respective fines at the Fiscal Agency within 24 hours after being notified. Please take notice of the fined establishments and inform the people about the amount of the fines which correspond to this letter.

Sincerely yours,
Hermógenes Prago
Coronel G.N., President of the Board of Price and Trade Control
(published 21 November 1943; my translation)

The "new" economic stabilization plan

On 3 March 1991, the national government announced a "new" economic adjustment plan to resolve the economic crisis, named after Antonio Lacayo, the minister of the presidency.[10] The most important measures were: a maxi-devaluation of the cordoba to stop hyper-inflation (five cordobas instead of one in exchange for one US dollar); a salary adjustment of 260% to 350%, considerably below the devaluation level; a monetary adjustment to end the indexing of prices in US dollars, which had been common practice since hyper-inflation started during the Sandinist government; and a control on prices of basic products sold in state-owned supermarkets and retail stores.

On the one hand, this plan can be seen as a continuation of both the Sandinist post-1988 and Mayorga plans, with the strategic goal to control monetary sources and reduce the state's fiscal deficit. Also, it would stimulate exports by lowering labour costs and incrementing prices (this time in cordobas oro) of exports. With the Sandinist adjustments it had in common the "shock" character of a maxi-devaluation aimed at drastic reduction of the real value of money in hands of the population, an objective that was directly linked to the goal of attacking price speculation, a common practice that made economic planning difficult.

However, the Lacayo plan contained some important differences compared with its two predecessors. Backed by an powerful publicity campaign to win support for the plan, it assigned a strategic role to the state and its enterprises in the provision of basic goods to supermarkets and popular shops.[11] A second and crucial difference constituted the backing of the Lacayo plan by external (US dollar) funding, which made acquisition of basic goods possible while guaranteeing the filling of fiscal deficit gaps. Initially, the plan was accompanied by strict control on statistics about the national economy. The obvious objective of this was to give a good impression to Nicaraguan people, while also pleasing international money lenders who closely followed the changes. That "everything was going in the right direction" could be read daily in the mass media.[12]

In Bluefields, because of the eternal problems of transport and communications, the impact of the new policy was only understood gradually as information came from the capital in the following days and prices were changed. We also have to mention that, at this time, Bluefields itself was the site for numerous negotiations concerning the establishment of new enterprises and mixed corporations (with local and foreign capital), with special interest shown in the commercialization of seafood, and the battlefield of traders in all kind of products from abroad that the coastal population had only dreamt about for many years.

Local market vendors and wholesalers were all affected by the devaluation, but the impact was by no means even. Those who had a relatively large amount of cash in cordobas suffered most as they saw their working capital reduced. This was the situation of many market vendors, mainly women heads of household. People with a relatively small number of cordobas or with their cash in dollars survived with little damage.

Two weeks after the measures were announced, merchants once again began raising prices. Meat was the first product to be increased. Given its importance in the daily food consumption of coastal people and Nicaraguans in general, the increase aroused the immediate discontent of the population. When prices of rice, beans, and flour followed shortly afterward, the *Blufileños* made use of one of the most popular media for expressing opinions (no matter the subject): the two local radio stations *Radio Zínica*, in hands of the FSLN, and *La Voz del Atlántico*, owned by the regional government.

Another two weeks passed before, on 8 April 1991, the regional autonomous government released an official communique establishing the price regulation commission. The commission was composed of five members — all men: two representatives of the regional government, two of the regional assembly, and one of the municipality. Simultaneously, the commission set maximum prices for 38 basic products (the coastal version of the *canasta básica*). The participation of the municipality can be explained by the intention of the UNO government to share political responsibility with the only other political authority of any importance in town, the municipality, headed by a Sandinist major. Despite this initiative, relations with the municipality and major remained a source of continuous friction.

The reasons for this friction have to do with the authority of the municipality, the (lack of) resources available to realize its tasks, and the fight about its institutional boundaries as defined in the Law on Municipal Autonomy. Formally, the municipality is in charge of the administration of enterprises and market stands (trade licences), including the collection of taxes on the use of a stand or table in the market and streets (daily payment), the collection of a 3% sales tax (based on the type of business, whole-sale or retail), and the provision of harbour services and the collection of harbour taxes (payment for each container, box, bag, or basket that comes in). Taxes on total sales are collected by the so-called Department of the Administration of Incomes, which also occupies the municipal building, although it represents the Ministry of Finance in the region. In practice, people identify the department and its work with the municipality.

However, the execution of these tasks generates a series of problems and conflicts. Many merchants do not register their businesses and, hence, evade taxes. Among the traders who register are wholesalers who register as retailers, thus paying lower taxes. Some of these wholesalers negotiate with the local authorities for exemption from taxes. According to the treasurer of the municipality, this use of *amiguismo* is immoral, but she cannot prevent it, because paying taxes depends on the conscience of the people. Other merchants complained about this illegal practice and, as a form of protest, started doing the same, creating a vicious circle of tax evasion. The Administration of Incomes department has the same problem concerning the collection of taxes. The head of the department explained that a shortage of inspectors and coordination problems with the treasury department of the municipality make the search for solutions difficult. Facing this situation, the UNO government, as well as the trade sectors, accuse the municipality of incompetence. The municipality answers these attacks with the accusation that the regional government does not offer support.

The communique also stipulated the nomination of 20 inspectors in charge of controlling prices and sanctioning people who would not follow the rules. Sanctions could range from fines of at least C$100 (US$20), temporary closure of the business, to suspension of the trade licence.

Finally, the regional government declared an "emergency situation" for the Bluefields region. This unusual move was a rather exaggerated way of demonstrating its authority, since formally only the president has the right to declare an emergency situation. Hence, it became clear that the regional government, under pressure because of the conflict and the demands of the population, had assembled its forces to take control, or at least to take back the initiative.

Having announced the general lines and objectives of its measure, the members of the commission went to work in "the field" where they found themselves obliged to define more specific norms and rules of the game.

Justifications given on the road

The regional government created the commission to provide a fast response to the popular discontent over price increases. The discontent was shared by consumers and merchants alike, because of a strike at the National Development Bank office in Bluefields, which created an increasing shortage of circulating money and, as a consequence, of basic products. The general confusion about the three currencies (old and new cordobas, US dollars) used in transactions also did little to improve the situation.

In general terms, the UNO spokesmen defended the measure with the argument that market vendors and traders in the town of Bluefields had raised prices after 3 March notwithstanding the clear economic policy presented by the president. According to members of the regional government, the commission was necessary to regulate the cost of living through the control of prices with the ultimate goal of maintaining the salaries of the people — salaries that were already sufficiently affected by the maxi-devaluation of the cordoba. To explain all its whys and hows to the population, the commission used the radio station *La Voz del Atlántico* on 10 April, two days after its official establishment.

In an interview on 26 April, the vice-president of the regional assembly and member of the commission gave us a more detailed explanation. To counteract possible criticism from the regional FSLN concerning the constitutionality of the commission, he argued that the measure could be justified as the obligation of the state to guarantee regulation of basic goods and to stop every form of hoarding, which is considered a crime (defined in Article 105 of the Nicaraguan Constitution). Although the government is "based on a capitalist economy, on free trade, this does not mean that there will be no regulation of prices."

He also explained that the commission represented the Ministry of Economy at the regional level (this ministry does not have a regional office) and this ministry has the right to dictate the prices of basic products. Therefore, the commission had its foundation in the Constitution.

When we asked him about the legal status of the "emergency situation," he had to admit that the regional government had abused its position and authority, since only the president can declare such a situation. However, he hastened to tell us that with this declaration the regional government intended to mobilize the people in an attempt to share political responsibility!

> **Merchants without scruples try to extort consumers**
> With the aim to stop further expansion, we have already several times criticised the behaviour of various merchants without any scruples who exploit the needs of the people, taking advantage of the scarcity of goods. With all kinds of pretexts these traders evade the regulatory emergency dispositions that have been imposed upon commerce. The result is that these coyotes of trade are responsible for the hunger and despair of the people, because they become without any compassion hoarders and speculators who extort the whole economy of the consumer population by corrupting its ethics. The conscient person should blame these traders for this instead of the government that tries to save this country in the situation that it faces as a consequence of the world crisis.
>
> Concretely we are referring to the case of sugar. A considerable cargo of sugar has reached Bluefields in the form of the cuota which correspond to its monthly needs. All the merchants who receive sugar presented the details of costs, including payment of insurance per quintal. On the basis of these data, the respective Superiority ordered the consumer sales-price per quintal. The price of a pound of sugar has been fixed at 70 cents.
>
> Today, the ones who evade the dispositions with all kind of pretexts, smart arguments and bad excuses, argue that they have to sell the sugar more expensive: some bags were ruined with black oil; other bags broke and were emptied during the trip; and others dropped into the water; others get lost. With the outcome that the consumer has to be the pagan.
>
> In the first place, the insurance has to be taken into account and the losing merchants should make use of it if they suffer this kind of losses; secondly, the logic and the commercial law makes them subject to "losses and profits." From this the change of the price of sugar that various traders pretend, does not result fair. The governmental responsibles for the regulation of prices should be inflexible in this case.
> (23 February 1946; my translation)

During the following week, the regional government used the local radio stations and its own regional television station Bluefields Television Channel 9 (BTV 9) to explain once more the goals and forms of operation of the commission. Repeatedly, the prices of the 38 basic products were communicated to the population and emphasis was put on the role of the price inspectors and the sanctions they could apply. These prices had been determined by a very hasty analysis of prices at three markets in Managua and transportation costs from the capital to Bluefields. This was a result of the need to act quickly, as the assembly's vice-president confirmed in the interview.

The haste with which this procedure was executed caused immediate reactions from the market vendors and traders, who explained that some of the fixed prices were too low to allow them to meet their costs. They pointed out that the cost analyses on which the commission had based its prices were inadequate and had to be revised.

Confronted with this demand and in an attempt to show its good will, the commission began a series of meetings with the different commercial interests to discuss prices, look at the need to adjust them, and determine new and "definitive" ones. Meetings with the sellers of meat, bread, dairy products, vegetables and fruits, and of pharmaceutical products were held. Encounters with other merchants, such as those selling basic grains, wholesalers, and retailers, were announced for the coming weeks. The results were broadcast on the radio and television. The members of the commission used the situation to stress the fact that they were acting and would continue to operate in a democratic way.

> The commission is operating in a very democratic way. We organized a meeting with the wholesalers and we discussed openly with them. Everybody agreed with the final dispositions. Each product was analyzed and a price for the wholesaler, the retailer, and the consumer was established. Afterwards some of the merchants start to say that we are imposing prices, but I can tell you that this in not true.... I admit that in the case of the first list of prices, not all products were adequately analyzed. We believe that for some products we made mistakes. Therefore we are proceeding to meet with the different sectors and we have advanced with the majority of them. (**The regional assembly's vice-president** in an interview on *La Voz del Atlántico*, 13 April 1991)

> First, we explain to them [the merchants] the objections of the population that prices are too high. Then, they present us with a list of costs. They make the first step. We revise their list of costs and based on that we propose a price. We revise transport costs including food and lodging for their stay in Managua where they buy products, because these are never in accordance with reality. The merchants will never tell us what they really spend. In other words, all the prices that we have established, are based on bilateral agreements. They have never been imposed.
> (**The representative** of the municipality in the commission, interview 8 May 1991)

This, however, was contested by the sellers of basic products who had participated in the meetings with the commission. Making explicit reference to former experiences during the Sandinist regime and the specific rules that they had established with the controlling trade ministry at regional level (MICOIN), they aired their arguments during an interview that we undertook with a group of 18 vendors of fruit, vegetables, basic grains, dairy products, and clothing.[13] Two excerpts follow:

> First, when they called us for a meeting about prices, they asked us if we agreed with the price that they established. We, as merchants, responded immediately. As an example we took the lemon. They fixed a price of 1.25 cordobas for one lemon. Some market-sellers were selling them for one cordoba.... They called us to find out if we agreed with them on the prices. They also told us that this week we will have another meeting because of the losses caused by the rain. Monday will be the meeting in which the government is going to fix a new price.
> **(Marlene**, a vendor of fruits and vegetables)

> In the Sandinist time, we arrived here in Bluefields with our products and then we went to the office of MICOIN. We presented the bills of all the things that we had bought. Hence, they came to see it and calculated costs of transport, including boat, truck and carriers, costs of food and lodging. Therefore we put all these expenses on the bills. Then they came and defined a final account which established how much one was going to gain. A profit that was at least enough to give one's children something to eat.... But now, nothing of that at all! Look, they also sent us the message that we are presenting false bills and this is not sure! Because I believe that nobody of us has changed [bills].... During the Sandinist time, the bills we presented had the name of the person where we bought the product on it. But now they say no that's not necessary. They do not ask us how much we spend. They say, "we are in charge and we will tell you how much the tomatoes are going to cost, how much the bananas, and at that price you are going to sell it."... They do not ask us anything, **they** establish the prices.
> **(Elisabeth**, a wholesaler/retailer of vegetables and fruits)

From 1979 to 1987, the Sandinist Ministry of Internal Trade controlled, to a large extent,[14] the trade and prices of basic grains and industrial goods through the state enterprise ENABAS and its chain of distribution points, so-called *expendios*, which were managed by private owners. MICOIN was also responsible for the issue of trade licences for each merchant, wholesaler, and retailer. Prices of basic grains were subsidized by the state. Moreover, in the case of the Atlantic Coast, MICOIN subsidized transportation costs, that normally raised prices 25% compared with prices in the Pacific region. Concerning other basic products that were sold by private market vendors, such as perishables, meat, and dairy products, the ministry established prices based on information about expenses given by the merchants and a calculation by MICOIN of transportation costs and a margin of profit that ranged from 10% to 20%.

According to the former regional director of MICOIN, on many occasions, merchants provided false data on their expenses, thus fixing prices that were too high. This was one of the ways in which many market vendors and traders managed to accumulate relatively large amounts of capital (interview, 4 May 1991). The Sandinist government liberalized trade in basic grains in 1987, followed one year later by complete liberalization of trade and prices. In Bluefields, the MICOIN office was closed in March 1989. Since then, the municipality has handled administration of trade licences and taxes.

With this in mind, we return to our case. The goal of the meetings was to negotiate prices that would be acceptable to all parties (commission, merchants, and consumers), taking into account costs and a fair profit that was determined at 15% to 20%. The prices agreed to in these meetings would be maximum prices. A market vendor would be free to sell at lower prices, as was clarified by the case of the lemon and the fruit sellers. However, if a vendor exceeded the set price, a fine would result.

After two weeks of meetings, a new list of about 40 prices of basic products was presented by the commission. Although some adjustments had been made, many market vendors continued to express discontent, criticising the arbitrary way in which the commission made calculations. As Marlene'swords demonstrate (above), the meetings had another unforeseen consequence. One round of negotiations would not be enough, because prices were changing due to the agricultural cycle that follows the dry and rainy seasons. The commission would have to meet regularly with the different sectors and become a permanent institution.

When we interviewed the members of the commission about this aspect, they admitted that this had to be the logical consequence of its goal and way of operating. However, in the weeks that followed no more meetings were organized, despite many promises broadcast on the radio that negotiations would continue.

Regulation or free trade?

> Free supply and demand... these are just words. However, in practice there are a series of phenomena that intervene. Previous to this government, the supply was the amount of products offered by the state. Here we talk about a controlled supply. Demand was determined by the necessities of the people and by the war. There existed a desperation to buy products. The people were having money and because prices were subsidized, they had enough purchasing power. We were confronted with situations that we now consider ridiculous! For example, every now and then the state offered a large quantity of plastic articles [plates, buckets etc.]. Immediately the people came and formed big queues. Others who saw this asked "what are you buying, what are they selling ?" And so the queue remained as long as before. Supply was allocated.
>
> In the first period after the liberalization of trade there were not so many changes. State supply was liberalised, but this did not lead directly to an increase of supply. At the same time, the continuous devaluations caused that the money people received was burning between their fingers. Hence, when they got their salaries, the next morning they went to buy all they could find in the market. Here we had another distortion of the demand.
>
> Actually, although supply is considerably free, the buying capacity of the consumer is considerably restricted. And this limited capacity causes a slow rotation of the inventories of goods. We now see shops filled with all kind of products whilst the people only buy basic articles. Demand is not so much a question of how much do I have to spend? and I buy it, but a series of alternative scenarios. My first scenario is to purchase the basics — rice, beans, sugar, cooking oil. However, in reality I can only buy half of what I

> need. Hence, demand is curtailed. This in turn forces the merchants to diversify their supply. Because the things one sector doesn't buy, another will buy. If today one sector doesn't have money, tomorrow maybe they will have.
> (**The former director** of the Ministry of Internal Trade in Bluefields, interview 4 May 1991)

In announcements on radio and television, members of the price commission made a special effort to explain that their measure was by no means contradictory to the national principle of free trade, launched as the cornerstone of the new political economy model for the country. Aware of possible political repercussions, they emphasized that they did not want to harm the economic interests of merchants. But as the Constitution so clearly indicated, the state was obliged to regulate the provision of basic products, with the ultimate aim of defending the salary of the consumer.

Because of the crucial importance of the legitimation of the price-control measure, we will have a closer look at the question of what exactly the different actors mean by free trade. In theory, the notion of free trade is based on the idea that there exists a free demand and supply of goods. Prices are fixed at equilibrium points where supply and demand are balanced, a process that is guided through a mechanism that can be symbolized as an "invisible hand." This mechanism functions by definition without external intervention or control.

Given this theoretical definition of free trade, we asked the members of the commission to give their interpretation in the Nicaraguan context. The quotations presented at the introduction of this case study give us a first idea of their interpretations. We also asked the former director of the Ministry of Internal Trade to describe this mechanism; this resulted in the eloquent discourse with which I opened this section. The goal I have in mind is to contrast his views with the explanations given by the UNO leaders; that of the vice-president of the regional assembly follows:

> Well, if you regulate the market in some way, can you speak about an unfree market? You can not, because the market continues to be a free market. The market is free because you can sell in every place of the national territory and every kind of product you want.... Free trade is one thing. The other thing is that the state has the obligation to protect the consumer with regard to basic products.
> (Interview on 26 April 1991)

More details were offered by the assistant of the executive:

> If a country produces and there is a surplus, alright, what I want to say is, if you are a trader, you are going to sell as cheaply as possible, because there exists competition between each other. That is what is happening right now with the beans.... In other words, I think that if we are going to produce more, we are going to have more competition and therefore prices will go down. And that is better for all of us, because people can consume

> spending less money.... Now you have free commerce, it is up to you. The regulation could be, as we told the people, we are giving you 20% [profit] on the beans, rice, sugar, soap, flour, for the retailer. A wholesaler can't go over between 5 and 10% of utility on a product. And when you have luxury goods, for instance, lotions and creams which you don't have to use, then you go over 30-35% and that is in all parts of the country.
> (Interview on 24 April 1991)

In these explanations we see that the idea of free trade is considerably restricted. "Free" means that you can buy where and what you want, but the government establishes who is a retailer or wholesaler. However, when we asked for criteria to define the two types, none of the people interviewed could give us a precise definition. The government (commission) also fixes the profit percentage and decides what is a basic or a luxury good: "A can of imported sardines is not very basic, because for this I have the bay of Bluefields to fish... A blue-jeans trouser is not very basic either. I can sacrifice myself and buy it next month." Based on these definitions, a chain of control can be established in which the government "regulates the wholesalers to be able to regulate the retailer, so that the consumer can buy as cheaply as possible" (statements of the **assistant** of the executive on *La Voz del Atlántico*, 13 April 1991).

According to the assembly's vice-president, in the future, this control should also imply that the municipality demands that every merchant maintain orderly records. Furthermore, the same assistant admits that in Nicaragua supply doesn't often satisfy demand, leading to a distortion of prices. Hence, we can observe that the members of the commission gave different and in some aspects contradictory interpretations of the law of the "invisible hand." The creation of a maximum price and margin of profit obviously distorts the mechanism of free demand and supply. Through direct intervention, the government, i.e., the price commission, defines the range of commercial freedom. Moreover, in the actual conditions of the country and, in our case, the Atlantic Coast, many external factors influence demand and supply.

Related to the explanations and justifications given to the question of free trade are two other important issues. In the first place, the "new" economic policy of the UNO and the price commission, in particular, cannot be considered without reference to the economic policy of the Sandinist government. The market vendors and traders are very clear about this. Whether in favour of the UNO or the FSLN, they do not hesitate to make comparisons between the two policies, based on own experiences and insights.

In contrast, the politicians are more careful in their discourse. Although UNO representatives interviewed did not make direct references to the Sandinist policy, we can detect a certain fear that the price commission will be accused of being nothing more than a resurrection of the Sandinist trade ministry. Regulation brought this ministry into an open clash with large numbers of traders and vendors. To avoid this kind of confrontation was and is a vital political task in the life and legitimation of the Nicaraguan government.

The second issue concerns an alternative way of controlling prices through the state-owned chain of supermarkets and shops. At the national level, the UNO government began an intensive promotional campaign in favour of this alternative, offering basic products at "reasonable" prices to the public. Besides, the government argued, the supply of low-priced products in its supermarkets and shops would force other suppliers to follow suit. However, contrary to the situation in the Pacific region, on the Atlantic Coast there are no supermarkets of this kind and the supply of goods in the shops owned by the regional autonomous government is very reduced. During the first two months of the existence of the commission, no reference to this alternative was made by its members in their public statements. When we inquired about the reasons why this alternative received no attention, the vice-president gave the most detailed answer:

> The problem is that our reality is different. We buy in Managua and to bring our products here in Bluefields we have to make a series of costs.... Therefore, the supply that the regional government can organize is very limited. We created the Regional Distribution Shop, which was supposed to offer 42 products, but I think they actually have only about 20 products. This is because of economic reasons.

As I will discuss in a coming paragraph, this issue did not remain in the background. At the beginning of June, the commission suddenly introduced the subject of the supermarkets, in an obvious attempt to come to terms with new circumstances at the regional level.

> **Will we eat each other?**
> (Hugo Sujo Wilson)
>
> It seems that the traders and speculators in general sang hallelujah the day that the municipality decided to augment and levy some local taxes. Because with the major cynicism imaginable and without the minor demonstration of social sensibility, the majority of them increased the prices of basic articles with the speed so characteristic of the age of this jet-set.
>
> Let us have a look at a part of the list of cruel prices: one pound of the most ordinary beef, **three cordobas**; one pound of bones and meat, **two cordobas and fifty cent**; one pound of fish with head, bones, intestines, and scales, **one cordoba**; one pound of sweet manioc, **fifty-five and thirty-five cents**; one pound of quequisque, **seventy-five and fifty cents**; one small, green banana, **ten cents**; and I could go on in this way.
>
> These lions argue that all these prices are due to the taxes, but they do not even convince a child of primary school. Because if we compare the increase of taxes in the cases where there was really an increase, with the increase of the prices of the products, we would observe that the price increase it out of all proportion in comparison with the taxes.
>
> Therefore, since this increase in prices is out of control it is the turn of the unions, other labour organizations, and individuals to fight for a compatible salary increase to avoid that the answer to the question that

> head this article will be answered positively. As one can see, an increase in the salary of the workers has as goal nothing less than his/her immediate physical survival.
>
> On the other hand, the persons who consider themselves Christians and democrats should remember that a population with empty stomachs does not understand reasons nor sermons based on nothing ideal that does not contribute to relieve its real hunger.
>
> (19 January 1968; my translation)

Complaints and denunciations

As we have shown above, the price conflict came to light when the population of Bluefields denounced the increases on the local radio stations. Although the commission had opened a special telephone line for people to use to inform them about irregularities and complaints, in practice this function was taken over by the radio stations.

For about two weeks after the measure was announced to the public, prices remained more or less stable. Then, almost daily price increases were denounced on the radio by both listeners and reporters who were undertaking in situ price surveys at the market and in shops. Complaints were heard about a wide range of products: soap, milk, bananas, cassava, tomatoes, onions, carrots, cabbage, rice, sugar, tortillas, cooking oil, soft drinks, and charcoal. For two full weeks, one of the main functions of the radio stations, especially on their news programs, was to denounce price differences and to point out the negative consequences for the consumers. However, in May, when complaints continued to be news of the day, they started to ask questions about the effectiveness of the measure and the commission in general. Because real control of prices did not take place, more fundamental issues were brought into the picture.

But it was not only consumers who made use of the radio to express their opinions. From the very beginning, both politicians and merchants resorted to this crucial means of communication to legitimize their own ideas and actions and to blame the bad feeling on the other party. The traders, when interviewed by reporters and during visits to the radio offices, complained about the prices established by the commission. Furthermore, as the price regulation issue became more and more a question of the principle of free trade, they used the radio to denounce the municipality's intention to clear the corner of the market of stands; to complain about bad service at the municipality's harbour office; to explain that prices in Managua had increased and that, therefore, Bluefields had to follow; to confirm that they had not seen a single price inspector at the market; and to ask for another series of meetings with the commission to adjust prices that were fixed during the first round. In other words, they defended their interests and points of view and refused to accept the label "inhuman predators" that the commission tried to put on them.

The members of the commission in turn aired two official communiques (24 April and 9 May) in which they announced more strict execution of the measure. From now on they could not longer guarantee a flexible attitude on their side;

instead of a dialogue they would apply the sanctions the commission had established.

These "debates" also made clear the important differences among the merchants with regard to economic interests, although they all viewed the commission as their common enemy. Retailers complained about the absolute control of wholesalers, who could presumably do whatever they wanted because they were the ones who bought the products in the Pacific region and abroad. Wholesalers, in turn, complained about the fact that a large number of traders paid retailers' taxes, which were lower.

In the words of one wholesaler: "Trade in Bluefields isn't legalized, it is informal..." and "the municipality doesn't do anything about it." One of the local wholesalers suggested that the commission force all retailers to buy goods exclusively from wholesalers to simplify price calculation. We can imagine what retailers thought about this idea.

Inspectors

One of the recurring topics on the radio concerned the role of the price inspectors. These "front-line workers," who were supposed to operate at the market and in the neighbourhoods of Bluefields, were accused of being inactive and completely ineffective. About the inspectors who were to function in the rural areas, nothing was said at all; from the beginning, it was clear that there was no money to pay this kind of employee outside the city. Although, initially, the commission announced that volunteers would be appointed (criteria for their selection were not given), this never took place. Hence, the communities were left to their own fate.

Problems concerning the inspectors were multiple. In the first place, of the 20 inspectors originally named, only five were offered a job and a salary. Of these, three were appointed by the regional government. However, among these three, one appointment was nothing more than symbolic, a "gift" from the regional head of the UNO to compensate someone who had helped him during the election campaign. The other two, who were appointed by the municipality, were already working for the institution: the inspector of weights and measures and the market attendant, both men. The secretary of the municipal committee and member of the price commission became the head of the group of inspectors, which in practice was thus reduced to four people.

In carrying out their tasks in town (inspection and sanctioning), the four inspectors managed to operate within **and** outside the bureaucracy, interpreting the job as they saw it and negotiating convenient deals with other actors involved in the price-regulation issue. Working in Bluefields, where they were known by everybody and where news was circulated quickly, they adapted to potentially controversial situations by doing what **they** considered convenient. Despite the enormous number of irregularities denounced on the radio, no sanctions were applied by the inspectors. Their attitude was, who is going to fine a friend or neighbour, when maybe tomorrow I will need their help.

Another way of circumventing sanctions was by bribery. One such case was

made public by the radio stations; an inspector was denounced by a trader when the latter was offered a nice "deal." Instead of imposing a fine of 500 cordobas (US$100) for setting prices too high, the inspector said he would be satisfied with a watch. And, in the future, the trader would not encounter any problems. After this case was reported, the inspector was replaced.

Avoiding strategic locations, such as the municipal harbour and market quay, where 90% of all goods came into town and where many sales took place, was also part of their way of working. Another problem was the low salaries that the inspectors received. After a month of work, the two employees of the municipality announced that they were not compensated sufficiently for their unpleasant job. When we interviewed the secretary of the municipal committee about the role of the inspectors, another variation on *amiguismo* was revealed (8 May 1991).

> It is hard to do something when other kind of interests play a role. The questions do not go together.... For example, when a fine is given to somebody, this person has to come to the municipality and pay it. But at the minute of paying the fine, they phone us and ask that we forgive them, because, well, the person did this and did that.... In other words, there is always the question of *amiguismo* and all that means that we are not able to do a very serious job.

To make his point clear, the secretary told us that so far only two fines had been paid. Hence, from the very beginning, we can observe a large discrepancy between the theory behind the measure and the ways in which it was supposed to be made effective, controlled, and sanctioned in case of violation. Despite this, the idea behind the role of the inspectors was not questioned by the members of the commission.

In our interviews with them on the subject, the head of the UNO party in the regional assembly observed that during his walks through town he had not seen the inspectors operating. According to him, greater effectiveness could be achieved with more inspectors. Even the secretary of the municipal committee, who seemed to have a more detailed and critical view of the work of the inspectors, did not question the principle of control.

The people who did question it were those related to the former Sandinist government. Based on their own experience with the issue of control of trade and prices from 1979 to 1987, they doubted the usefulness of inspectors. In an interview, the Sandinist mayor of Bluefields illustrated these experiences and ideas with a comparison.

> It is like the teacher who tries to develop ways of control in order to prevent his students from cribbing during exams. However, he will never be able to put it into effect, because it is a simple fact that there are more students who are looking for new ways to crib than the teacher who is alone in his struggle for control. In other words, the authorities will never be able to control the traders, because they are the creative majority. (12 April 1991)

Similar observations were expressed by the head of the regional FSLN committee: "People are afraid of fines and inspectors for some time, but after a certain period that will pass" (24 April 1991).

Transportation: a crucial link or a political roadblock?

One of the issues that was mentioned time-after-time as central to the whole debate on prices and trade, was transportation. Prices in Bluefields were generally 25% to 50% higher than in the Pacific region due to the costly transport of products by river and road from the capital. The various parties discussed at length, first, real transport costs and, second, who should pay these costs. The wholesalers argued that the cost of transport was one of the main factors that affected their operations, heavily influencing prices in Bluefields.

During the first meeting between the commission and a group of wholesalers, an agreement was reached to establish a price of 18 cordobas for every 1000 kg transported from Managua to Bluefields. However, in practice, transport costs are directly negotiated between transporters (the boat owners who cover the Rama-Bluefields route and truck drivers who travel between Managua and Rama) and the merchants. In other words, transport policy is formulated outside the domain of the formally responsible authorities — the regional government as represented by the price regulation commission and the Ministry of Transport and Construction.

The commission, in a way, simplified the problem of transport costs by excluding the minister of transport and construction from its forum and discussions with merchants. They took over the entire responsibility of the transport and construction ministry, without even consulting the minister.

Struck by this political move of the regional government and interested in his role, the creation of the commission, and the problem of transport costs, we asked the minister for an interview. Very economical with his words, he started our conversation by explaining that the ministry had established tariffs for the transport of both freight and passengers and that prices were checked by inspectors. However, control was not complete; for example, wholesalers were much harder to check because they brought large amounts of goods to the coast. The subtleties of defining the task were indicated by the minister in a comparison:

> You know, there is not a control on anything, even in your home. Even the children, if you try to regulate them, what will take place? We control them on extent. We don't marginalize them, but control them. Even though, as I said, commerce is free, it is not for you to abuse and charge what you want. There is always a tariff. We have a guy down there in Rama who charges wharf fares, so much. That is the municipality and the regional government who are supposed to control the prices.
> (24 April 1991)

Following this explicit reference by the minister to the supposed role of the municipality and regional government, we took the opportunity to ask him his opinions about the price regulation commission.

> **The minister**: Well, that is almost politics for me and I don't have a damned thing to do with politics. I keep far from this... [He bursts out in a somewhat nervous laughter.]
> **Question**: But you are the minister of transport!?
> **The minister**: Yes, but...
> **Question**: Transport is also about politics?
> **The minister**: No, it is not. No. I don't like politics and I keep far from it. I do regulating and ehh...
> **Question**: But this commission is also normalizing?
> **The minister**: Well, that information you have to get from ... [laughter] ... I don't really... I would not like to enter this.

Not completely satisfied with his answers, we tried another angle.

> **Question**: Let me ask you in another way. The commission did not ask you for advice about the measure that they intended to take?
> **The minister**: No. It has no connection with us.
> **Question**: It has nothing to do at all with transport?
> **The minister**: In a way it has to do with transport, yes, if it is too high or what not. Then we talk it over and consult, but the rest, no.
> **Question**: I have the same question, if it is politics or if it is not?
> **The minister**: Yes, it is and stupid politics [angry]. Because if they (this is my personal opinion) can normalize the prices like this, they would have to furnish these people with the product and give them a certain price. This way then they could, but if they has to go around and buy and gather what not. That is my personal opinion and not political. I don't have a damned thing to do with that! They [the commission] don't ask me this stupid thing and if they would, I would tell them the same damned thing I am telling you here.

Obviously, we had hit upon a major inter-institutional and bureaucratic conflict about authority and perception of politics and policymaking. On the basis of this interview, we achieved a much better understanding of why the minister of transport was excluded from the establishment of the commission and the subsequent talks with merchants. More than being a crucial link, the issue of transport (costs) turned out to be a major political roadblock for the price control. These observations bring us to the next section in which I try to identify how the price regulation commission influenced the structure of power and authority at the regional level.

The configuration of power at the regional level

The creation of the price regulation commission and its policymaking rapidly became immersed in the everyday affairs of the population of Bluefields. As we have seen, the price issue was used by different groups to defend economic and political interests, express ideas and opinions, and legitimize values, norms, and rules. The price issue was turned into another means of defining or redefining the

configuration and distribution of political power at the regional level. This happened within the wider context of changes taking place in the country and, at the same time, as a result of regional circumstances in which specific questions played a key role. The upheaval over prices provided, in the first place, a motive for the regional government to intervene directly in the organization of economic life in Bluefields. Once the commission was created and the measure announced, the members elaborated norms and rules with the aim of defending specific interests.

The creation of the commission can be interpreted as a means for the UNO regional government to show the local population (including both UNO and FSLN voters) its capacity to act on its own, independent of the national government and policies elaborated in Managua. Of course, here we are talking about autonomy, although this was never recognized explicitly by the regional government nor by the commission. Successful execution of the measure would without doubt improve the image of the regional government, which, so far, had been unable to realize any significant economic, social, or cultural project or program in aid of the autonomy process.

Formally, the regional government included one member of the municipality in the commission. Its main reason for this action was to share political responsibility, because during the execution of the measure almost no real coordination or cooperation took place between the two institutions. Members of the commission declared that administration of the market and trade were the responsibility of the municipality. On the other side, the representative of the municipality complained about the fact that the regional government intervened in purely municipal affairs thereby violating local autonomy. The way in which the measure was executed and the problems that arose did little to resolve the longstanding conflict between the two regional authorities.

At the same time, the creation of the commission contributed to already existing conflict between the main political and administrative entities at regional level and between these institutions and the social groups affected by it. Concerning the former, we can mention the fights between the executive body of the UNO government (popularly known as "government house," the building where they have their offices) and the regional autonomous assembly (which meets in another building). The commission was installed without any consultation with the regional assembly. This contributed strongly to the high-handed image of the government, which had so far ruled without taking into account the ideas or opinions of the regional assembly. The same kind of conflict also existed within the bureaucracy of the municipality, where the "front-line" workers continuously complained about the lack of support from their bosses.

Clashes between groups of merchants and the municipality (harbour services office and tax adminstration office) are examples of conflicts of the second type. These clashes emerged frequently as the result of the rather spontaneous initiatives of both sides, which were meant to improve structural problems concerning trade on one hand and the control and administration of trade on the other.

The attempt of the municipality to clear the market corner of stands was immediately denounced through *Radio Zínica* by a group of merchants who argued that the mayor had no right to do this without offering the merchants a viable alternative. When another group of market vendors denounced, on the same radio station, the bad services of the harbour office when its director refused to open the gate one Sunday morning to let produce pass, they used a similar argument: on the one hand, the authorities take drastic measure to control trade, but, on the other hand, do not guarantee even the minimal conditions to realize this economic activity such as harbour services.

The increase of prices
(Lindolfo Campbell)

Nobody doubts that the Atlantic Coast is passing through a serious and deep economic crisis. Year after year one can observe this problem. This reality becomes even more clear with the closing down of companies that provided work to thousands of labourers in Puerto Cabezas and the MADINSA company of Bluefields. Actually, the principal source of maintenance for many *Blufileños* are the fishing companies that operate in this region.

Together with this macabre reality that keeps the people from the Atlantic Coast in consternation, appeared another reverse that forms a real social cancer whose consequences can be serious for this population that has already suffered so much.

This time we refer to the constant and uncontrolled increase of prices of basic products. The worst of this case is that it seems that the authorities who are supposed to maintain the stability and equilibrium of the prices, ignore this vice which some opportunistic traders profit to oppress more and more a population already plagued by misery and poverty.

As always has been the case, each time a government declares a tax, the victim has been the mass, the poor class. For example, the government decreed a 5% tax and this was enough for some traders to increase the prices of their merchandise by 25% and in some case by even more, that is to say, some articles that before cost one cordoba, cost now 1.25 or more. Who is paying this? The consumers. And as we know, only certain commercial houses in Bluefields are authorized to apply the 5%. However, Moors and Christians are applying it, with or without right. What is more, products that should not be taxed are being taxed only because there is no authority to put a firm halt to this abuse.

In the same way we have seen that recently the prices of other articles have increased, for example, two bananas cost 25 cents, not to speak of plantains, sweet manioc, etc. A short while ago we have heard that meat suffered another price increase. Without making a mistake, we could say that in the last years, meat has become over 100% more expensive. Something that constitutes the basis of our alimentation has now become a luxury.

Facing this sad economic situation of our town, a pathetic and horrible reality becomes clear: we are referring to the salaries. While prices are

> increasing more, salaries remain at the level of misery. And this indicates us that recently the people from the coast necessarily are spending more than they earn. This crisis could have an upsetting outcome.
>
> If the competent authorities are the ones to defend the interests of the people, even more so when the people are object of constant abuses, we believe that the time has come that these authorities intervene in this case for the security, tranquillity and well being of the community.
> (31 August 1972; my translation)

A new turn?

At the end of May, most prices, including those of vegetables, had increased by almost 100% compared with those originally established by the commission on 8 April. Once more, the market vendors told radio and television reporters that "for weeks they had not seen any price inspector" and that the prices fixed by the commission "would make their business go bankrupt." They demanded a meeting with the commission to talk about the situation (*Radio Zínica*, 23 May and BTV 9, 25 May 1991).

The producers of the BTV 9 news emission asked why the inspectors were not doing anything about the price violations. Would there be chaos again? (22 May 1991). For about three weeks the commission remained silent, giving the impression that it was dying a silent death.

However, on 3 June, two members of the commission appeared on BTV 9 to announce another measure that should give new life to the regulation of prices. Having changed its name to the more neutral sounding "life-standard improving commission," they openly admitted that prices of most basic products had increased and that neither the inspectors nor the sanctions had been effective. When fines had been imposed, the merchants simply did not pay them. Moreover, four inspectors were unable to cover the whole town.

Therefore, as an alternative, the commission proposed to open a supermarket for vegetables managed by the regional government in addition to the existing Regional Distribution shop. This would make it possible for the regional government to offer vegetables at low(er) prices, which would force vendors to adjust their prices to remain competitive.

"We have to educate the market vendors," explained the vice-president of the regional assembly, referring to the situation in Managua where "price control is a great success and merchants behave well." This comment was followed by the threat that one day a price commission (headed by Antonio Lacayo) could come to Bluefields to check prices in the market and what would happen then?

Although the members of the commission did not state it openly, this initiative meant a 180 degree turn in the regional government's policy concerning the control of trade and the recognition that the price regulation commission had been a complete failure. The appearance on television was obviously an attempt not to lose face and to improve the image of incapable politicians who had not succeeded in making their plans work.

June and July passed without any concrete step by the government or the commission to open the vegetable supermarket. The proposal to open "mini-markets" in three neighbourhoods remained nothing more than a plan on paper. On 12 July, the municipality organized a meeting to discuss ideas to stop the expansion of trade in town. What was needed, according to the mayor, were "concrete steps." No one from the regional government attended the meeting.

In a news telecast, BTV 9 observed that chaos in the streets of Bluefields was growing. Responsible authorities did not do anything: the police did not regulate traffic; the Ministry of Health proved incapable of keeping the streets and market clean; and the municipality did absolutely nothing to control the expansion of trade. What happened to the plans for the mini-markets? Is the municipality only interested in collecting taxes? were the questions asked (19 July 1991). A few days later, an answer was provided by the secretary of the municipal committee when interviewed on television (22 July).

> There are no solutions for the expansion of the market. There are no funds to build the mini-markets nor for the new market at the harbour. Last week, we increased the taxes for the merchants who come from Managua to sell their products. But that doesn't help either, they keep coming to Bluefields. We have to operate in a more coordinated way with the different authorities, such as the Ministries of Health and Transport, the regional government, and the regional assembly, but this is really very hard to realize.

Hence, problems continued. On the last day of July, a group of 20 vegetable vendors denounced, on *Radio Zínica*, another attempt of the municipality to clean the market corner and remove the stands to the harbour without any previous consultation with the people affected. At the same time the market vendors made use of the opportunity to protest against wholesalers who make unfair competition in the region.

Moreover, the market vendors known as the "people from Masaya" (meaning in general, coming from the Pacific region) were heavily criticised by the group, who accused them of illegality and disturbing local, that is, coastal trade. The following day, the small group from Masaya, mainly women, who were very upset by the insults of their colleagues, went in their turn to *Radio Zínica*, which was rapidly becoming the main forum for discussion of the regulation issue. They claimed that they felt threatened and demanded a meeting with the mayor to discuss their situation. This request was not answered. Then, on 13 September, in a very short communique transmitted by *Radio Zínica*, the commission stated that all remaining price inspectors had been fired and that no more control on prices would be executed. Five months after its creation, this statement signaled the formal end of the commission and the measure.

Conclusion

The post-election events in the country at large and the case of the price commission in particular demonstrate that policymaking is not confined to the ranks of the government or the state. The social construction and transformation of the liberalization plan and price regulation measures occurred in a complex, non-mechanical way and in many different contexts. Only a detailed analysis of concrete events that took place can contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and significance of policymaking processes — processes that are affected by the interactions of everyday life, negotiations, and manoeuvres that continually restructure the configuration of power relations between the individuals and "parties" involved.

At the national level, we have seen that the change of government set in motion a process of continuing fights and negotiations to define new positions. At stake are the most important results of 11 years of Sandinist government and the future direction of development in the country. Given the often very limited space for survival of people, the use of violence continues to be a common practice to reinforce arguments. As one of the regional FSLN leaders in Bluefields explained: "The people of Nicaragua are *pleitista*, they like to dispute and fight for their rights. They are used to fight."

The analysis of the price commission, in light of the new economic measures (the Lacayo plan), shows that the allocation and space dimensions of policymaking and its transformation are of considerable relevance to the question of who wins and who loses. The Lacayo plan, in this sense, is just another example of the exclusion of the Atlantic Coast from considerations behind policies designed in Managua, not taking into account the particular conditions of the region.

Although coerced by the no-nonsense demands of international monetary institutions and the US government, the UNO at the national level embraced the adjustment recipe as if the Atlantic regional context did not exist. This is not only revealed by the simplistic free trade or liberalization messages, but also by the continuing ineffectiveness of regional representation of state organizations.

At the same time, however, the regional government does not seem to be interested or able to protest seriously against this situation. The regional UNO leaders were forced to face the local lack of problem-solving initiatives and policies as the population of Bluefields demanded that it do something about the emerging conflict with local merchants who continued to create their own rules by increasing prices. Feeling the impact of the Lacayo plan, the angry *Blufileños* asked the regional government to stop the further deterioration of their household situation.

The literally face-to-face confrontations between the regional UNO government members and *Blufileños* (who, don't forget, had helped them get where they were) is a fundamental element for the understanding of regional politics. The situation required an answer to the concrete households needs of the people. A discourse on macroeconomic variables and requirements, as presented by Violeta Barrios and Antonio Lacayo in Managua on various occasions, would certainly not have been accepted.

It was within this context that the regional government created the price commission, although constrained by a lack of financial resources in combination with little or no practical experience in governing and affected by internal power conflicts. Thus it attempted to show its capacity and authority to dictate regional matters, a quality that so far had largely remained invisible to the local population. By doing so, it made clever use of the doubts and discussions on the interpretation of the Autonomy Law in terms of the functions attributed to the regional government versus the central government and INDERA. While, on the one hand, the regional government's room for manoeuvre was limited by the face-to-face confrontation with the people of Bluefields, this ambiguity about the Autonomy Law provided a "way out" of the problem moving toward its other opponents, the national government and INDERA.

However, our study shows that this way out became, first of all, highly pragmatic and incoherent as, in the implementation of the measure, practical steps preceded ideological ones. Furthermore, the regional policymakers were forced to continuously adjust to new situations created by the often unforeseen (not to say, undesired) actions and reactions of consumers, merchants, and price inspectors. As a result, the free trade logic of the measure, presumably as part of the adjustment and liberalization ideology, became less free and less logical than assumed on the outset. In fact, it became clear that planning free trade is fundamentally contradictory in nature. Discourse and practice of the commission became caught in a web of contradictions. Despite the adjustments made by the members, they clearly lost control of the situation in their attempt to regulate small-scale traders without negotiating a substantive degree of cooperation with them.

The case study also demonstrates that, in this process, existing inter-institutional struggles over political and administrative authority, forms of cooperation, and autonomy were reactivated. The creation of the price commission contributed very little to resolving conflicts between the regional government and the municipality nor between the authorities involved in the trade issue.

The making of policy in the town of Bluefields cannot be understood without taking into account the fact that local social actors draw upon a specific mix of experiences, ideas, interests, and reasons to rationalize their actions and upon particular sets of social relations to get things done. The Nicaraguan reality cannot be understood without considering the appreciation of the people of some of the Sandinist initiatives (based on their ideas of a mixed economy) and their simultaneous agreement with some of the UNO ideas and actions (founded on a capitalist ideology). At the national and regional levels, the UNO government has been confronted with this reality. In the former case, this confrontation resulted in the process of *concertación* in which the UNO, FSLN, and principal labour unions attempt to find a social compromise for the future of Nicaragua. At the regional level, we can interpret the creation of the price commission as an attempt to develop formally an adapted form of *concertación*. An unsuccessful attempt, however, as the price commission died a silent death.

In the end the merchants managed to impose their own rules and thus defend their interests. We might expect that this will continue until a new round of

negotiations is initiated or new alternatives are proposed by the regional government. In the meantime, it seems that *amiguismo* endures as the crucial resource in the maintenance of relations with and within state institutions, despite the political stance of people who often seem diametrically opposed.

It is through this business of doing favours that access to state resources is acquired — favours that you do for "friends" or for "good friends." In the case of the former on purely instrumental or pragmatic grounds, for the latter because of real friendship as someone from Bluefields once told us when we asked him to explain the subtle functioning of *amiguismo*. And although some women are successfully involved in this business of obtaining access to state resources, as we will see in Chapter 5, in general it is men who run this "enterprise."

Notes

1. The first results of this study can be found in an article by Kevin Campbell, Roberto Rigby, Noreen White, Gabriel Torres, and Ronnie Vernooy, entitled: *Si el mercado manda, para qué necesitamos gobierno ? La comisión reguladora de precios y la puesta en marcha del control de precios en la Región Autónoma Atlántico Sur* (WANI 11, October-December 1991: 1-11). A preliminary version of this chapter was presented at the Advanced Research Seminar of the Department of Sociology of Rural Development, the Agricultural University of Wageningen in April 1992. The central theme of the seminar was: The return of the market? Understanding "liberalization" policies through the sociological study of everyday life.

2. The UNO is a coalition of 14 parties ranging from conservatives to Marxist-Leninists that was formed to oppose the Sandinist party FSLN in the 1990 elections. The Sandinists governed the country from 1979 to 1990. The new president, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro does not belong to any of these parties (Cortés Domingúez 1990). She is best known as the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the former director of the newspaper *La Prensa* and a critical adversary of the Somocist regime, whose assassination in January 1978 intensified the final insurrection of the revolutionary forces.

The UNO obtained 53.9% of the votes for seats in the National Assembly (51 deputies); the FSLN 40.8% (39 deputies); the remaining seats went to the MUR and the PSC. In the region of Bluefields these percentages were: UNO, 58.6% and FSLN, 34.3%, indicating the strong support for the UNO in this part of the Atlantic Coast.

In the **regional autonomous government** in the Bluefields area, the UNO got 52.7% of the votes corresponding to 23 seats; the FSLN, 37.2% or 18 seats and YATAMA 9.2% or 4 seats. For the corresponding assembly in the **northern Atlantic region**, YATAMA obtained 22, the UNO 2, and the FSLN 21 seats.

3. The first article of decree number 10-90 states that: "To concede in form of rent all those rustic possessions appropriate for agriculture or livestock that at the moment of promulgation of this Decree correspond to the State, either as property or in hands of [i.e. confiscated] whether or not they are administered by one of its institutions and that have been attributed to the State on the basis of decrees of confiscation or expropriation, or that have been declared as public utility and that have been confiscated by the former government [Sandinist] in one or another arbitrary way or that are in hands of third persons who are not the legitimate owners..." Excluded from these possessions are the lands of the Somoza family that the revolutionary government confiscated in August 1979. To execute decree number 11-90, the UNO government created a special commission in charge of studying all the demands of expropriated owners to get back their lands or other belongings (houses, farms). When we left Nicaragua in October 1991, this commission had received several thousand requests, which will be considered one by one to see if property can be restored or people will receive compensation.

4. The principal resolutions of the agreement were:

- The workers would receive a 43% salary increase for the month of July and a further increase for August. These augmentations, however, were less than the accumulated inflation rate from May until July.
- The government promised to propose a law for a minimum salary to be paid in golden cordobas.
- Workers at state institutions and enterprises would not be reprimanded for their participation in the strike.

- The government would develop a rehabilitation plan for the industrial and textile sectors to avoid the closing down of companies.
- Subsidies for public transport in favour of students, teachers, and state employees would be re-established.
- The government promised to stop the execution of Decree 10-90; Decree 11-90, however, would not be affected.
- The workers agreed to participate in a national dialogue to achieve a social and economic *concertación*, in which the economic stabilization and adjustment plan of the government would be discussed with all the sectors involved (employers, employees, unions, and government).

5. In May 1990, when Brooklyn Rivera was appointed as minister of INDERA, the head of the regional government, Alvin Guthrie, gave one of his characteristic "benefit of the doubt" answers when asked what he thought about the institute: "This institute has still not been completely defined, since it has to be discussed in the National Assembly what its limits will be, how it is going to raise funds, etc." One of the advisors to the UNO government in Bluefields was more direct in his answer: "This is something we are going to fight against to the last second. In the first place, INDERA was not contemplated in the autonomy project and in the second place, it would mean that Alvin Guthrie or the regional assembly would have to go through Brooklyn Rivera to get to Violeta Barrios. This is not right! We are definitely against it." (cited in *Sunrise*, 25 May 1990)

6. The road from Managua to Rama and the Escondido River had been the target of other attacks and occupation by Contras. One week before the transition of government, Contra groups threatened to attack several villages along the route. In October 1987, attacks on Santo Tomas, Muelle de los Bueyes, and San Pedro de Lovago caused dozens of deaths and wounded and large material damages. The express boat from Rama to Bluefields was attacked and destroyed various times.

7. INPESCA is the National Fishery Institute, in practice the equivalent of a ministry in control of material and financial resources for the fishing sector. From its creation, INPESCA has been criticised for its centralist style of policymaking, an attitude that especially on the Atlantic Coast has not been appreciated as it means a continuous intrusion on the autonomy rights.

8. In November 1991, the tomb of Carlos Fonseca, one of the founders of the FSLN, was destroyed. The same day, revenge was sought by a group of angry FSLN sympathizers who attributed the violence to UNO extremists, headed by the vice-president Virgilio Godoy and Arnoldo Aleman, the major of Managua. They burned several state-owned cars, attacked UNO-oriented radio stations and the house of Arnoldo Aleman and burned down his office (*Barricada Internacional*, December 1991: 4-6).

9. Part of an interview conducted on 24 April 1991 with the executive (who did not say a lot) and his assistant.

10. Antonio Lacayo is the husband of one of Violeta Barrios' daughters. In practice, he is the president's right hand, a kind of prime minister, responsible for the policy of the government (ENVIO, August-September 1990: 39-47). In this role, he has been the driving force behind the ongoing negotiations between the UNO government and the FSLN that, so far, have resulted in a centralist course. In various occasions, Antonio Lacayo has been confronted with more right-wing exponents of the UNO headed by Alfredo Cesar, the president of the National Assembly and former Contra leader and Virgilio Godoy, vice-president of the country who would prefer that the FSLN be eliminated all together from

the political scene. Antonia Lacayo is also director of an important industrial complex in Nicaragua and owner/shareholder of companies in other Central American countries.

11. According to ENVIO (July 1991), the state controls the prices of 25 of the 53 so-called basic products that can be bought at its chain of supermarkets and retail shops.

12. It is important to take into account international pressure on the UNO government. Through the execution of the adjustment plan it hoped to obtain new financial resources to cancel outstanding debts, which the international financial institutions demanded as an absolute condition for new loans. Since 25 April 1990, Violeta Barrios and the UNO ministers have been involved in ongoing negotiations at this level (ENVIO, May 1991: 1-11). In this way, the new government continues to build upon the adjustment plans of the Sandinist government that were also aimed at regaining the confidence of these institutions. Actually, the FSLN is actively involved in many of the UNO's missions to obtain international loans.

13. This group interview occurred on 8 May at the CIDCA office in Bluefields.

14. I use the expression "to a large extent" because this practice was not without problems. According to the former director of MICOIN in Bluefields, these difficulties started in Managua where the Atlantic Coast was always the last region to receive its quota of basic grain (mostly at the end of each month). Besides, there were almost always reductions in quota due to a national shortage of these goods. Then there were problems with transportation to Bluefields as trucks were used in principally for carrying export crops. In Rama, important quantities of goods were stolen. And finally, within the region, MICOIN had to fight with the other ministries about available boats to carry its cargo from Rama to Bluefields. All these obstacles caused what the director appropriately called a *desfase* or delay in the execution of the policy.

5. "PULLING AND HAULING": THE WORLD OF TRADE IN THE TOWN OF BLUEFIELDS

> This load of business that you see today that looks like a country that the people losing their head. That they are not gaining nothing. They just do that to see if they would advance, but when you pass again and look, the business close down.
> (**Ray Collins**, a creole *buhonero* from Bluefields)

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I analyzed the commoditized and non-commoditized relations, dynamics, and problems of the hinterland economy. We have seen that many of the rural households maintain strong relations with Bluefields. Due to the effects of the Contra-war, hurricane Joan, and the economic crisis, complete or segments of families have settled in town, temporarily or permanently. Forced to find new solutions to satisfy subsistence needs, many of them have tried to make a living in retail trade, transport, or the preparation/sale of food and drinks.

In this chapter, we will follow in more detail these rural-urban movements and document the new webs of social relations that have emerged as a result. I will do this by focusing on the highly diverse commercial practices of people in Bluefields.[1] On the one hand, this will give us a better idea of the importance of the urban-based initiatives undertaken by the displaced households or household members who have occupied many parts of Bluefields in the last decade. On the other hand, it will draw our attention to the omnipresence of trade in the urban economy. Although commerce has always played a key role in the history of the town, in the last few years it has become an activity in which almost everyone is involved.

I propose to identify the ways in which the world of trade in Bluefields is socially constructed, and, after the hurricane, reconstructed. Although once again our study will focus on **local** trading and livelihood practices, including material and cultural elements, these cannot be understood without taking into account the regional and supraregional contexts as we saw in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I will explore these contexts as they become directly relevant to the livelihood practices of the people in Bluefields. To understand the impact of supralocal level events, we must determine how men and women experience them. Only then can we understand how the continuing national economic crisis, the results of the 1990 elections and the change of government that followed, and hurricane Joan sometimes constrain and sometimes enable people to satisfy basic needs and accomplish their "projects."

Throughout this chapter, I will pay special attention to the role of women in trade. Women constitute the vast majority of those involved in this economic activity, both in Bluefields and Nicaragua as a whole. We will focus on the complexity of the lives of some of these women by highlighting the variety of ways in which they deal with gender, socioeconomic, political, and cultural issues in their attempts to solve problems arising from management of their business, rearing children, and dealing with men, in short, with the maintenance of household affairs in the broadest sense of the word.

Evidently, macroeconomic and political circumstances continue to restrict opportunities for women by increasing the burden of domestic commitment and sharpening gender divisions of labour, inequalities, and conflicts (CIERA, 1989; Rodriguéz 1990; ENVIO, May 1991: 21-30; Stead 1991: 53-87). However, as we will see, women are not simply passive victims of sexual oppression, economic exploitation, and political exclusion. Through a process of negotiations, struggle, and forms of cooperation and solidarity that for many start at home, they have successfully managed to create opportunities for themselves, develop projects, both individually and collectively, and sometimes pursue very successful careers.[2]

As an introduction to our study of Bluefields, I will briefly review some of the main issues that have been discussed in studies on trade in Nicaragua pointing out merits and shortcomings. Next, I will present a general picture of the world of trade in Bluefields, followed by a more detailed analysis of the organization of commerce. This includes the different ways people get into trade; the varieties of enterprises or how women and men bring together vital resources (money, workforce, information, skills) in their trading activities; and how, in this process commoditized and non-commoditized relations play an important role. It also encompasses the individual and collective efforts and struggles of people to ensure the growth of their business. This is what I call the politics of trade. Throughout the chapter, I will look at the influence of gender and ethnicity as they inform and are informed by different forms or patterns of trade. Hence, we will consider how these factors are reciprocally related to the economic and political sides of commerce.

The Nicaraguan debate on trade

Although as far as I know our study in Bluefields is the first detailed contribution to an understanding of trade in the coastal economy, other studies have been done on commerce and especially on the informal sector in other parts of the country. I will briefly discuss the central arguments of some of these studies. The objective I have in mind by presenting this overview is to see whether these studies provide us additional points of interest to integrate into our analytical framework.

It is only quite recently in Nicaragua that the issues of trade and the informal sector have attracted the attention of social scientists. I think this can be partly explained by the fact that, since 1985, there has been a nation-wide proliferance of small-scale businesses, although this kind of economic activity has been growing in importance since 1945. Another reason is the recognition in 1988 by the former

Sandinist government of the economic and political significance of informal trade in more realistic and positive terms. This new appraisal not only opened the political window but also the scientific view of commerce as the studies I discuss here demonstrate.[3]

Some basic data on commerce that give us an impression of its magnitude and significance are offered by Sola Monserrat (1989) in a study on the geography and economy of Nicaragua. Based on statistics of the Sandinist Ministry of Internal Trade (MICOIN) for 1988, she states that about 120,000 people are involved in commerce and the provision of services **apart from** those who are employed by the state. Of these, 65,000 were registered legally, i.e., they had an official licence from MICOIN; the remainder operated illegally.

Sola Monserrat argues that the spectacular growth of the informal sector (she seems to define informal as illegal) was a reaction to the economic adjustment policy of the Sandinist government in 1985. This policy liberalized prices of basic grains while putting a strict control on trade and speculation. As one result of these measures, she mentions the boom of the principal market of the country, the "Oriental market" of Managua. Between 1983 and 1987, the number of traders at this market increased from 4500 to 27,000! (ibid: 222-223)

One of the shortcomings of Sola Monserrat's study is that she does not tell us anything about the period before the revolutionary triumph of 1979. Although his specific interest is the dynamics of small-scale industry in Nicaragua, Laenen (1988) provides us with some useful insights into the history and actual significance of the urban informal sector. According to him, this sector, including the work of domestic servants, experienced an accelerated growth from 1950 to 1979. This change was in contrast with other Central American countries where the trend was downward or more or less stable as in the case of Honduras.

Between 1981 and 1985, however, this trend in the direction of informalization of the economy did not continue, although important changes took place within the sector. Due to the worsening economic situation, more and more men and women shifted their activities to trade. In a context of low official prices, high demand, and scarcity of most basic and luxury goods, retailing became very lucrative. Laenen also suggests that this shift occurred as a result of many new and part-time business initiatives developed by people who worked in the formal sector.[4]

Another significant feature of the Nicaraguan informal sector, according to Laenen, is the crucial role played by a large number of women (a common characteristic in many "underdeveloped" countries) who are the main income generators for their households. During and after the Contra war many of these households were and remained headed by a single parent.

A last facet that this author mentions is the post-1985 policy of the Sandinist government, which, for the first time, dealt in specific terms with the sector. These terms, however, turned out to be negative and oriented toward the restriction of and greater control on trade and the sanctioning of speculation (ibid: 134-142). Although Laenen does not expressly say so, petty traders continued to be left to their own fate, because they were seen as non-productive economic agents. They were also viewed as politically unproductive in the transition to socialism.

A more detailed analytical and empirical view of the characteristics and dynamics of trade and traders as part of the urban informal sector is found in Chamorro et al. (1989: 153-184). These scholars present a synthesis of 15 Nicaraguan studies as a contribution to a book about urban informality in Central America (Menjivar Larín and Peréz Saínz 1989).[5] These studies, which were carried out between 1977 and 1988, analyze a variety of issues, such as the magnitude and composition of the informal sector, the relations between the informal and formal sectors of the economy, the survival strategies of individuals and social units involved in informal activities, and the impact of Sandinist policies on them.[6]

In their concluding remarks, Chamorro and co-authors observe that these studies have made some important contributions to an understanding of informality. To some extent these observations coincide with the critical discussion of informality I developed in Chapter 1. They show that there exists a great heterogeneity in the informal sector, and that members are not only involved in speculation. This demythologizes the negative conceptions that, for many years, have been prevalent among FSLN and state cadres and that, until 1988, formed the ideological basis for policies on the sector. The case studies also draw attention to the importance of often conflictive internal household relations. Furthermore, they stress the role of cultural and ideological factors in the growth of informality. However, the studies have some shortcomings. They are almost all Managua centred and little is known about other areas and the authors' definition of informal is too all-encompassing and ahistorical (ibid: 184-186).

The conclusion we can draw from these comments on the 15 studies is that an informal-formal sector approach, in the end, only gives us a series of issues that should be analyzed. It does not provide a sound understanding of nor a methodology for the study of the ways individuals and social units make a living by trade. In fact, despite the explicit critique of these authors on the use of the concept of informal sector, they do not offer an analytical alternative.

A recent contribution to the study of commerce in Nicaragua comes from the Central American Historical Institute (IHCA), based partly on a study elaborated by NITLAPAN (ENVIO, July 1991: 19-50; ENVIO, November 1991: 13-46). Making use of a formal-informal framework defined as the public sector and industry versus everyone who works on his/her own, IHCA analyzes the impact of the March 1991 economic adjustment measures of the UNO government. Its conclusion is that this policy (see Chapter 4) leads to increasing impoverishment and proletarianization of people and enterprises operating in the informal sector.

According to IHCA, this trend marks a clear rupture in the explosive growth of the informal sector. For the first time in 12 years, the salaried workers and companies of the formal sector are relatively less affected by the adjustment policy of the government and this time clearly at the expense of the informal sector, which becomes subordinated to it.[7] To make things worse, IHCA concludes, the informal sector "finds itself ideologically disarmed and it is undeniable that it does not have anybody that represents it politically" (July 1991: 44). The sombre prospect means increasing restriction of consumption, underemployment, decapitalization, and internal and external competition. For many, there is only one way out: emigration.

These articles provide up-to-date information on the informal economy. They also focus on patterns of differentiation within the informal sector and the ways people dealt with the adjustment plan of the UNO government. In various aspects, however, the authors tend to reify concepts, such as subsector and sector. Furthermore, they define ideology/politics in a rather narrow way, completely disconnected from everyday practices and, as we will see, individual and collective political struggles of people to make a living.

This critical overview demonstrates once more that almost all of the frameworks used to analyze studies on commerce and the informal sector do not overcome a functionalistic and dualistic approach. This then brings us to the bumpy streets of Bluefields, where, day after day, men, women, and children of all ages create a colourful business panorama as they occupy sidewalks, market stands, *caramanchelas* or 1001 varieties of tables, very small, small, and medium-sized shops to offer goods purchased at regional, national, and international levels.[8]

Bluefields or the transformation of the town into market

Walking through the streets, the busy ones in the central areas and the quieter ones of the surrounding *barrios*, one gets the impression that the market has extended all over Bluefields.[9] Everywhere women (the majority), men, and children are involved, in seemingly growing numbers, in commercial activities occupying local versions of supermarkets, shops, *ventecitas* (small-scale places where goods are being sold), market stands in and outside the official market buildings, tables, and parts of the central park, squares, sidewalks, public buildings, and houses. They sell all kinds of products: sweets, cigarettes, soft-drinks, liquors (especially rum), (coco)bread, meat, fish, fruit, vegetables, imported clothes, shoes, perfumes, portable sound systems (very popular on the coast), six-foot-high refrigerators, and the latest large-screen televisions.

Every week new actors try to become part of this colourful, highly diversified, and rapidly changing world of trade. Others, however, stop showing up at their stands, tables, or places or close their *ventecitas*. They have been unable to make it in the struggle for survival and accumulation of capital. Or they have decided to try their luck elsewhere or in other economic activities.

No one knows with certainty how many people are involved in these activities.[10] This, I think, reflects the two facets of the informal sector discussed in the introductory sections of this chapter. Its magnitude makes it difficult to keep pace with the comings and goings. Many try to avoid being counted, administrated, and taxed. However, the fact that the interested authorities, such as the municipality of Bluefields and the regional government, do not have exact, up-to-date information also indicates their inability to deal with the changes, willingly or unwillingly, despite the "we are going to control it" statements of several politicians and bureaucrats.[11]

In the context of Bluefields, the labels "formal" and "informal" are of little use. On one hand, if we use the definitions of Chamorro or ENVIO, 99% of all local

enterprises are informal. This does not tell us anything about how they actually operate or about differences within the sector. On the other hand, in Bluefields informal agents are seen alternately as people who: sell on the streets; pay no sales taxes; pay no municipal taxes; pay no taxes at all; only subsist on trade; or some combination of these criteria. In both cases, we are inclined to see the forest, but not the trees that actually constitute it.

Although the number of people involved in trade has certainly multiplied, commerce has always been of importance in the economic life of Bluefields. According to data of the Sandinist Ministry of Internal Trade, in 1987, about 90% of all goods were coming from outside the town or region. This percentage has probably not changed much, as the number of products coming from within the region remains limited. These are fruit, basically citrus; coconuts, cacao, tubers, and roots; small amounts of basic grain, especially rice; some meat and milk; fish and other seafood; charcoal, firewood, and lumber. All other merchandise comes from the Pacific region, mainly Managua, or from the Caribbean, including the island of San Andres, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, and the Cayman Islands.[12] After the trade embargo was lifted, imports from the USA increasingly played an role, as they did before 1979. Hence, one can comprehend the vital function of commerce, given the almost complete dependency of Bluefields on "imported" goods.

As we will see in more detail, the flow of products is organized in a variety of ways, according to their type and quantity, means of transport used, and type of merchant involved. The majority of these products become commoditized and remain so on their way from producer to consumer. Some become commodities at one stage of the chain and lose this characteristic at another. Some never become commodities at all, as they are exchanged directly for other goods, a system that is known locally as *trueque*. Sometimes, products are not commoditized in the strict sense, when their value is partly defined on personal grounds in a specific time-space context (see the case of Antonia Mendoza that follows). Hence, just as I will argue for a critical analysis of the concept of market(s), the notion of commodity also needs to be re-evaluated.

The organization of trade

Many traders travel to purchase the things they want to sell. Some go three times a week back and forth to Managua, some weekly, some once a month. Others prefer to order by telephone when they can count on people to send goods to Bluefields (from within the country or abroad). The case of the women who sell fruit and vegetables is a special one. Many of them participate in small rotating groups that make the tedious voyage by boat and bus or truck to the capital to buy products for themselves and for those who stay behind.

By definition, the *mayoristas* or wholesalers, with or without a commercial establishment (the latter are known as *buhoneros*), are the people who move the largest amounts of merchandise. They sell goods to *minoristas* or retailers, who include owners of stands and *pulperias* or small shops, mostly grocers; *ventecitas* or

very small shops, in most cases located on verandas, in windows, or in part of a rooms in the house; or *ambulantes*, itinerant vendors. However, among these categories are many women and men who secure at least part of their stock themselves.

A characteristic that vendors all have in common is the use of credit to keep their business going, men or women, creole or mestizo, rich or poor alike. An analysis of trade in Bluefields (and Nicaragua in general) is incomplete without an understanding of the complex credit relations. The amounts of money borrowed or loaned vary considerably, as do the kind and number of relations that constitute these networks. In some cases the relation are built on already existing family ties, friendship, economic cooperation, or political affinity; in others, they form the beginning of new links.

Another important characteristic of commerce on the coast is the influence of the US dollar. Although, once again, no exact data are available on the circulation of money in Bluefields, many families receive significant amounts from kin abroad. Apart from money, through these contacts they obtain considerable quantities of consumer and luxury goods. Moreover, in recent years local fishermen have been paid in dollars for their catch in an attempt to stop contraband and direct sales to foreign companies or entrepreneurs.[13] These dollars help people on both the consumption and production sides and, in many cases, mean substantial support for survival and/or success of a business. Although all over the country remittances play a role, Bluefields has attained an image of being **the** dollar paradise in the country attracting many traders from the Pacific to the local *plaza*.

The explanation that some people from Bluefields give for the transformation of the whole town into a market, finds its logic in their conviction that Nicaragua has finally reached the prosperous era of "free trade" — an era, it is believed, that has come with the change of government in 1990 (see Chapter 4).

I would like to point out that the growth of the market cannot be understood in simple terms of the invisible workings of "free" forces that define for once and for all the rules of the game now that the Sandinists have handed over the presidency and government to the UNO. As I intend to document in this chapter, the social (re)construction of the market is a complex, often provisional, and conflictive process with many unintended consequences and unforeseen outcomes. Moreover, it is an historical process in which people are affected by major events, such as the hurricane and the electoral victory of the UNO, but not merely in a determined and functionalistic manner. As I have tried to argue in Chapter 2, "starting all over again" is an active and multi-dimensional process for farmers and traders alike. In this process, people tend to adapt to new circumstances through imagination, inventiveness, **and** their accumulated knowledge, experience, and skills. Insecurity and ongoing struggles for space at the local level, literally and figuratively, seem to be the actual dominant features of this process. As such, it reflects many of the characteristics of the post-election process in which the material results and social meanings of 11 years of revolutionary transition are disputed and renegotiated.

One of my first conversations with a creole trader from Bluefields gave me an insight into many of these characteristics. Among the small group of creole merchants, this trader owns a shop in the Commercial Street, as the name indicates, one of the busiest trade areas in town for many decades.

> I am doing this now for about one year. I stayed eight years outside the country. I left after the revolution for reasons you can imagine.... Some of my friends went to prison, so I want to speak freely.... I make three trips weekly between Bluefields and Managua. Three times by plane, three times by boat. In Managua I buy things and sell them in Bluefields. Small things, whatever the people demand [from coffee, jam, corn flakes to cigarettes, soap, pencils and medicines]. I buy things in the dollar-shop or directly at the distributor [for example, in the case of cigarettes]. Business goes very well, the people of Bluefields have enough money. I sell in small amounts to the people, not for wholesale. I can make more money selling rice and flour per pound than selling a whole bag at once.... The situation in this country is very complex. How the people manage in this economy, I am trying for years to understand that. But the people fish, some have cows, others do some small business.... The problem right now is the lack of cordobas. They say right now there are more dollars in the country than cordobas. It's true, we are living in a dollar economy. Dollars I have enough, right now I need cordobas.[14]

Like the market of Masaya

At the time of that interview, there was still a shortage of many products in Bluefields, in spite of the fact that trade was increasing day by day; at the wharf and on the streets of the town small stands and tables appeared in amazing numbers along the sidewalks, offering a wide range of products. According to a creole woman, the Commercial Street and street that leads to the market buildings were looking more and more "like the market of Masaya," one of the biggest in the country. Her association with the rather chaotic character of the Masaya market implied criticism of the scene in Bluefields.

In September 1990, I made the annotation in my fieldnotes that "Bluefields is becoming one big market." Especially in the central neighbourhood, new market stands and tables sprang up like mushrooms, selling sweets, chips, gum, cigarettes, fruit, and bread; the stands that offered shoes and clothes had also visibly increased in number. On different corners of the same neighbourhood, you could find men who were buying and selling dollars. I could not pass without being asked: "How much do you want to change, mister?."

In the streets of other neighbourhoods, itinerant traders tried to make a small living from selling fish, "Johnny cakes" (a locally baked soda cake), tortillas, homemade chicken soup, bread, fruit, and vegetables. A new and special attraction was a man pushing a supermarket cart (that he probably got through contacts in Miami), in which he had stored sweets, gum, and chips.

At the same time, however, one could observe small groups of men standing around street corners. Others, including women, were going from house to house to ask for a *chamba*, a small job. Unemployment was becoming a serious problem in the city. Although the UNO government had recently introduced new currency, the golden cordoba, transactions were still being carried out in the so-called "*chancheros*," the "old" cordobas (*chancho* means pig).

In December 1990, the first "supermarket" of Bluefields was opened by the Caribbean Commercial Corporation, offering products that revived memories from the past: condensed milk, cornflakes, instant cocoa, instant coffee, tea, US beer in cans, whisky, perfume and lipstick, shoes, and clothing. Shortly before, another company named SIE-International had opened, selling similar kinds of imported products, ranging from dried prunes to chicken, stereo tables to toys. Based on observations in various neighbourhoods, I estimated that, in one out of every two to three houses, products were sold or traded in one way or another.

As we have seen in Chapter 4, in March 1991 the UNO government announced its new economic stabilization and adjustment plan. From that moment on, the country experienced a further expansion of commercial initiatives. All kinds of new shops were opened, selling every kind of product imported from the USA and other Central American countries. In Managua, new shops were opened almost daily, with announcements in the newspapers and on radio and television (which were certainly making large profits by "selling" the commercial revival).

In the capital and in Bluefields, new consumer and luxury goods were on display in supermarkets, shops, market stands, and *ventecitas* alike. After 10 years of austerity, the "hunger" for products among the people from the middle and higher classes seemed insatiable. Cars, radios, televisions, videos, microwave ovens and other electric equipment, luxury clothes and shoes, sports equipment, and leisure wear; if you had the money, you could find something to buy.

Simultaneously, the signs of increasing poverty were becoming more clearly visible: a growing number of children begging in the streets, an increasing number of assaults and robberies, reports of children who fainted at school because they had not had breakfast. In more quantitative terms, between 70 and 80% of the population was estimated to live in poverty (Unesco and FAO reports 1991).

This brief sketch of the expansion of commercial activities into all corners of Bluefields (and the country) forces us to rethink the concept of market as a geographically well-defined space in which goods and services are traded (mostly for money) according to universal rules of supply and demand that regulate prices. As our experience demonstrates, this definition does not stand the following critiques. First, the borders of the market were continually moved by the massive incorporation of new products and services as social actors developed new initiatives.[15] Second, the market was no longer the place where a particular group of traders operated under the controlling eyes of the local political and administrative authorities. The incredible variety of traders and their different and often unstable relations with authorities made it clear that this idea was also mistaken. Third, the working of the "invisible hand" that guides negotiation of prices was much more complex than assumed, partly due to the interrelations of political,

social, and economic interests and partly to the effects of the economic crisis with inflation rates that skyrocketed.

Our study also demonstrates that scarcity can be distributed over time and space through thousands of concrete negotiations between buyers and sellers. Through business relations based on long-standing acquaintance and confidence, some merchants managed to get access to "scarce" goods while others could not. Through friendship or political affiliation, some traders managed to fix prices as they pleased, thus changing "official" prices. Others, who lacked these ties, were not able to do so.

A fourth critical element concerns the particular macroeconomic situation in Nicaragua, with its ongoing crisis, hyperinflation rates, and "shock" adjustment measures. These factors meant that most people were just trying to survive, causing traders to change their sales strategies. As Ray Collins, the creole *buhonero* from Bluefields who opened this chapter, explained to us: "We cannot just depend on cash [money] for everything. Although we buy in cash, we can't get back everything in one shot, but we have to go dime-dime."

In this situation, the value of goods is continuously (re)negotiated in concrete interactions, sometimes creating a new logic that completely contradicts the economic rules. For example, in the middle of 1991, many products were less expensive in the communities than in Bluefields, although they usually cost more because of transportation costs. However, to be able to sell at anything, merchants in the communities were forced to reduce prices below Bluefields levels.

We can conclude that the "simple" logic, internal coherence, and timeless functionality of the theories — be they (neo)liberal or (neo)Marxist in nature — and of the economic policies that are based on them (see Chapter 4) are unable to explain the conjunctural, incoherent, and complex forms and meanings of the Janus-faced market and the related rules of supply and demand. Therefore, the occupation of new spaces and the creation of new social relations and rules are important signs of how social actors tend to redefine their everyday lives, at home, in the streets, in offices of companies, at the town hall, or in the *casa de gobierno*. It is in these processes that they redefine, consciously and unconsciously, with intended and unintended results, kinship, economic, and political relations encompassing local, regional, and, in some cases, also national and international levels.

Commerce: a women's world?

One of the most obvious changes in the world of trade in recent years is the increasingly important role of women. In Bluefields, women have occupied positions in every corner of town and have opened *ventecitas* at home. In and around the old market buildings and along the Commercial Street, women constitute by far the majority of the merchants.[16]

The number of women wholesalers and owners of shops has also increased, although here they remain a minority. The managers of the commercial enterprises established by the Sandinist government and now in the hands of the regional

government directed by the UNO are all men. It seems justified, therefore, to conclude that among the people and households living at or below subsistence levels, women form the majority.

In this section I document and analyze some of the features of this process as it is embedded in the attempts of people to start all over again and make a living. As we will see, attempts is the operative word, as insecurity continues to be the main characteristic of the environment. Therefore, the emergence of new gender relations and divisions of labour as a result of the key role of women in the Bluefields market should not be interpreted as a definitive break with the economic exploitation and subordination of coastal women within and outside the household and family units (Torres and Vernooy 1992a: 10-11) nor with the fading of class and/or racial differences among coastal women. What it means, however, is that these women are actively reshaping the regional political economy. Together with thousands of other Nicaraguan women merchants, they are also transforming the national political economy.

To understand the increasingly important role of women in market affairs, it is necessary to look at everyday trading practices that women must undertake to run their businesses and make a living. These practices include weekly trips to Managua to buy products at markets and companies and transport them to Bluefields. This implies, in the first place, dealing with the poor infrastructure between the Pacific and Atlantic Coast that make traveling extremely tedious. It also requires managing a whole series of activities: gathering information about the locations, quantities, quality, and prices of goods; selecting types and amounts to bring to Bluefields; negotiating final prices; getting goods packed and loaded onto trucks; arranging for transport to Rama, unloading at the wharf, and transfer to the boat to Bluefields; having them checked and taxed by the harbour authorities in Rama and Bluefields; and, finally, having them unloaded in Bluefields and transported to shops, homes, or stands.

As we learned by accompanying several women on their trade trips, they have developed their own ways of accomplishing these tasks, employing men for the heavy work. As women so clearly expressed, these activities are integral parts of their lives as merchants. The ways in which they accomplish and perceive them are a result of their ability to look around, calculate, talk, ask, listen, negotiate, and make (quick) decisions, in short, to do business, in spite of the harsh, unpleasant, and unhygienic conditions in markets, trucks, and boats.

When we asked the women how they perceived these abilities, they emphasized different elements to define their business styles. By style, I mean the distinctive manner in which people deal with the everyday tasks of work and livelihood, in this case, related to trade. Hence, I see it very much as a specific cultural expression and, as such, it has a role in the local and time-bound construction of social relations in general and business in particular.

One of the woman stressed the "esthetic" side pointing out the importance of selecting attractive products to satisfy the demands of customers. Others considered getting good information and establishing relations of trust as principle facets of their way of working. One woman pointed out that it was important not to be

influenced by men and their attitudes. Yolanda, a wholesaler and shop owner, was convinced that women are better traders than men, because they know how to get ahead and in general are not plagued by vices such as drinking and spending money on other women. Antonia Mendoza, one of the most successful wholesalers in town, highlighted other aspects:

> Women do have more ability to speak, more ability to go where a man cannot get involved. Because to a woman they will not withhold anything. For example, when we lived under control of MICOIN, I could buy on my own. I said to my husband, "Go and buy this and that," but he didn't get it. Then I went myself. I said, "Good morning, how are you doing?" and I talked with them and they gave me gifts and I got everything I wanted! Thus, that is the success of women in trade. It is not because men fall in love with you, not because a woman is nice or beautiful, or goes perfumed and well dressed.
>
> Of course, you have to take care of how you look like, because they will treat you as they perceive you. You have to give a good impression when you go to an office of a manager of a company and chat with them. That is the success of women: amiability and correct treatment of clients and suppliers. Besides, men are disorganized.

Similar explanations for the success of women were given by several of the male merchants that we interviewed. Ernesto, a creole *chambeador* called this "the professional ethic" of women, which he considered to be their great advantage in doing business. Ray Collins believed that women have fewer vices and are more responsible. This probably has to do with the fact that they are closer to *el hogar* or home life. They make trade **part of their lives**, just as Ray used to do: "Women are very dedicated, precisely as I am. Even so much that sometimes we forget to eat!"

Bluefields: the world of trade

In the following sections, I relate several stories as part of the identification and further elaboration of key analytic issues in the study of trade in Bluefields.

As a first step in the description and analysis of local trade, I will describe the basic categories used by merchants and others in Bluefields to indicate differences.[17] These differences are related to the physical spaces where people do business, the scale of their operations, the kinds of products they sell, and where the goods come from.

The stories or cases that I describe are not necessarily representative within the categories I have chosen in the Bluefields context nor in Nicaragua at large. The examples serve, above all, to show the complexity of the everyday lives of people, in which they experience both success and failure. They are also useful for looking critically at the simple categories of traders that people use. Several of the merchants and politicians that we interviewed were well aware of the tendency to

categorize as they explained to us how some managed to advance in their careers and thus gradually passed from one category to another. Others, however, experienced a more up-and-down or back-and-forth rhythm in their ongoing struggles to make a living.

Getting (back) into business

As I have indicated, in the period from January to May 1991, about 500 new trade licences were given out in the municipality of Bluefields. Along with the ones not formally registered, this makes a total of 750.

Among these newcomers were many people who lost their jobs due to government measures to reduce the state apparatus. Some made use of a special "employment conversion plan," financed by USAID, that offered state employees a premium (18 months of salary paid at once) if they would voluntarily resign. In Bluefields, dozens of men and women working for the hospital, schools, and ministries took advantage of this offer. Many used the cash to invest in goods and set up a *ventecita* hoping their newly obtained capital would "resist" inflation.

Others were unemployed because of problems in the regional lumber and fishing companies. With their savings, loans from friends, or with money from children or other kin living abroad (mainly the USA, although many Blufileños have family in Costa Rica), they also tried to get into business.

A third group was the households that decided to invest the wages of one or several members of the unit in goods. The buying and selling of these goods became the task of the ones that stayed at home, often including children and grandparents.

These groups joined those who had occupied the streets or parts of their houses in recent years, among whom were many farmers who, due to the war and hurricane, were forced to come to town. Some families stayed. Others went back after one or more economic failures. Dozens of rural households "split" into parts, for shorter or longer periods as we have seen in Chapter 3. All tried their luck in trade. Some started with little more than their labour, looking for a job with the fishing companies, as loader and carrier of goods, or as a "gardener."

Several men managed to buy a *carreta*, a cart to carry products around town, with small savings or with a loan from a friend. Some, who were able to accumulate a small amount of capital, moved into commerce, as itinerant traders or as *minoristas*, retailers. The case of Angela and her daughters, documented in Chapter 3, shows that some established a multiple small-scale enterprise selling products from their farm and goods acquired from wholesalers combined with prepared food. Women involved in cooking *tacos* or *nacatamelas* relied partly on farm resources, partly on inputs bought in town. Other peasant women baked bread at home to sell in the streets of Bluefields.

As an illustration of the stories of these people, we will look at the experiences of the peasant family of Justo Miranda and Marlene Rodriguez. This case shows the importance of building up a network of relations to operate as a *carretonero*. It also demonstrates the unforeseen consequences of "following somebody's good

example," leading to increasing competition among cart owners and, as a result, reduced incomes. A third key feature concerns the "reversal of fortune" that this family actually intends to accept, by leaving the urban economy and returning to the rural area they had to leave nine years ago due to the Contra war. As such, they are among the dozens of households that have taken this step, swimming against the current of rural-urban migration which, over the past decades, has been a constant feature of Nicaraguan society.

"Agarrar patio": the case of Justo Miranda and Marlene Rodriguez

Justo, his wife Marlene, and their eight children form a mestizo family that came to Bluefields in 1983 as they were forced to abandon their farm on the Punta Gorda River due to a series of attacks by Contras.[18] They arrived with a few belongings at the house of a niece, upset by their flight and "disoriented," as Justo described it, because they knew nothing about life in town.

The Sandinist government promised to give them small quantities of basic products, but as Marlene soon found out, this lasted for only two weeks. She was told to look for work, for example at the fishing companies, because the government could not continue supporting them (hundreds of families faced the same problem).

With the bit of money they had, they decided to start a small retail business, buying bags of cassava and coconut from the peasantry in the hinterland and reselling them at home. This was not a success, however, as competition to obtain the scarce crops (due to the war once more) was strong and Justo did not like the continuous fights to get his share of merchandise.

Then, Justo talked with one of his brothers-in-law and a friend, after which they decided to try their luck at PESCANICA, one of the regional fishing factories. This didn't last very long either. They resigned the day they started working for the company because the salary was much lower than promised. It was so insignificant that Justo would not have been able to buy enough food for his family.

It was one of their sons who, rather coincidentally opened the way to Justo's future career and survival of the household. One of this son's friends had just finished building a *carreta* or small cart to carry goods. Following his example, the son built his own cart. When he had earned his first *realitos* or cents with it, he proudly told his father that this was his contribution to helping the family. He asked Justo to accompany him in his job, to which Justo, still surprised by his son's initiative, agreed. "Alright, let's go. But, I don't know anything about this, because I work in the *monte* [i.e. as a farmer]. I look at these people pulling a cart, but I don't know how to do it." As we will see, he learned fast.

Shortly after they entered the "pulling and hauling" business, they met a man who offered them a larger cart. Although it was old and heavy, Justo decided to buy it with money borrowed from a friend. This marked the beginning of his career as a *carretonero*, which would last for six years until health problems caused by the heavy work forced him to stop.

When the family was confronted with this situation, Marlene found a solution by baking bread at home and selling it on the streets. A year later in 1990, however, she and her sons decided to return to Punta Gorda, because they were convinced that life in the country was much better than in town, sowing, harvesting, and satisfying most of the needs of the family. Justo stayed in town for the time being, because the farmhouse had to be rebuilt and they did not have enough money to buy provisions for all of them to return at once.

In 1983-84, there were very few *carretoneros*, according to Justo. Although in the beginning their earnings were not high because nobody knew him, after "*agarrando patio*" (literally: grabbing courtyard, planting roots), i.e., establishing relations with customers, they were able to "make good money." At the time Justo's children worked with him. Later, they began to dislike the job and left their father on his own. Their customers were mainly owners of small shops located in various parts of the town. Competition increased when many other displaced peasants came to Bluefields. Many of them, all men, constructed a cart to make a living.

Daily except Saturdays, in the early morning and again after lunch, Justo would start work at the corner of Commercial Street and the street that leads to the old market buildings, one of the busiest areas in Bluefields. Here, he offered his services to customers who wanted goods carried to their homes or shops. Once out on the streets, he met new customers, thus obtaining a number of jobs that, if he was lucky, came one after another without long periods between. Four times a week, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, Justo (and the majority of his colleagues) would go to the municipal wharf where the express boat from Rama arrived carrying many people with lots of cargo. This would provide him with work until six or seven o'clock in the evening, after which his workday would be finished.

If a customer's cargo too large or too heavy for Justo to carry alone, he would look for help from one or more "*ayudantes*" or assistants, as Justo called them, i.e., fellow *carretoneros*, in some cases supported in their turn by "*compañeros*" (friends). It is important to stress the use of the word "assistant," because Justo remained responsible for the job. This implied directing the work, dividing the salary, but also paying on his own for losses or damage to the cargo. In this kind of job, Justo operated very much as "temporary" employer; or he might act as "temporary" assistant, when by a colleague to help out.

In all cases, payment between customers and Justo and between Justo and colleagues were in cash. Prices depended on the kind and weight of products and in the case of difficult or long trips, a surcharge was added.

Until the change in government in 1990, when it ceased to exist, Justo was member of a cooperative of *carretoneros* that had been created as a result of a policy demand by the former regional Sandinist authorities. Justo's experience with this cooperative was a bad one. According to him, he did not get any benefit from it and the leaders used members' contributions for personal purposes. "They made many promises, but at the hour of arrival they did not comply with anything! When we were looking to get money [to buy paint and other materials to improve the carts], there was no money!"

Another problem that Justo found very annoying was the control by the local

authorities, through the cooperative, over their licence. They all had to be registered, carry a "driving" licence, pay several taxes, have a number plate on their cart, and keep it well painted. Not only were these demands exigent, they also required "paperwork," because the police, the municipality, and the Ministry of Transport all wanted forms completed.

At the time of our interview, Justo was planning to join his wife and children. As he told us, "Right now the cart does not make enough money. There is almost no cargo because there are so many people pulling *carretas*."

Many of the women merchants, both from Bluefields and from the Pacific regions, occupied places in the streets of the town after the hurricane. There they began to sell "*a la brava*" or without waiting to get a licence, as one of them explained. They attempted to return to the business they had developed before the disaster, in some cases careers of one or more decades that they had begun as young girls, helping their mothers run a market stand or sell goods around town.

For some of these women it meant a change of environment as they heard that Bluefields was an attractive place where many dollars were circulating and goods were lacking. Some of them registered at the town hall, others did not.

For Zelmira, a women who sells fruit and vegetables on a corner of Commercial Street, the reason for coming to Bluefields was different. Her trade trips from Managua to the coast and to Corinto were a tactic to escape a husband who has sexual relations with other women and gets often drunk and violent. Traveling to Bluefields for Zelmira is a way to "let the bad times pass by," as she describes it.

As I mentioned, other women inherited the business tradition from their parent(s). Lidia is one of the few Chinese women who have stayed in trade on the Atlantic Coast. Together with her husband, who has a job at one of the banks in town, she carries on the successful operation of a *pulperia*, that her father had built up after his arrival at the beginning of the 1950s, in the neighbourhood of "New York." Although Joan hit their house and shop, damages were relatively minor.

In sharp contrast with Lidia's, is Sandra's career. Sandra is a single woman, 40 years old, with six children who continues to occupy the stand of her deceased mother in the market building. Pushed by her mother, Sandra quit her poorly paid job as a nurse and took over the business while raising her children and dealing with a man who had all the vices possible.

Among the male traders, we can also find men who learned business from parents. An example is Winston, a 26 year old vendor of dairy products who followed in his father's footsteps. Ray Collins, the creole *buhonero*, is another example of a merchant with a long business history. He learned to travel around town selling goods from the "Turks" who, together with Chinese merchants, dominated wholesale and retail business in Bluefields and on the Atlantic Coast before the overthrow of Somoza.[19] In 1979, with bank loan, he started a business that he has remained in ever since.

What we can learn from these examples is that there are many ways in which people got (back) into the business of trade. These ways can only be understood by

taking into account the macro-structural political and economic circumstances and their regional impact **and** the initiatives that men and women have developed to become merchants. This double perspective demonstrates that, through the decisions and actions of the merchants, the macro-circumstances are being transformed. The diverse commercial practices emerged and continue to emerge in different time-space contexts in which needs, access to key resources (labour, capital, information) through specific sets of social relations, and personal abilities, and ambitions play a role. The origins of these practices cannot be reduced to one single mechanical and deterministic logic, be it the national economic crisis, the expansion of international capitalism, or the ideological shift toward "free trade" authorized by the UNO government.

Moreover, as we will see in the following sections, people go through different steps or stages in which they learn the rules of the game (or don't), reproducing existing ones and/or creating new ones. In this process, they develop different sets of values and aims and networks of relations that vary in quantity and quality. Over time, they also experience different degrees of competition in which some manage better than others. Thus, changes at the individual and aggregate level are not linear. This will bring us to another feature of the world of trade in Bluefields, the varying forms and levels of success as the people themselves give meaning to it and as they become visible in terms of capital accumulation.

Advancing: hard work, money, cleverness, responsibility, and... luck

> We have different states. Some gain more than others to be frankly speaking. Some gain nothing. Some businesses fail. It is just the one that persists, that is the one who'll stay.
> (**Ray Collins**, creole *buhonero* from Bluefields)

Listening to the stories about the careers of the traders, it became clear to us that success or progress has many different meanings. Moreover, the explanations given for the degrees of advancement in the world of trade vary considerably. What often struck us, as men and women told us about their good and bad experiences, was the detailed analysis they had made of the hows and whys of their careers and those of others. In some cases, they attributed success to one single factor; sometimes, they mentioned a combination of factors.

On the basis of their interpretations and our own observations, we can explain the differences in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, culture (including religion), personality (character, skills), and good opportunities or advantageous circumstances, which we might simply call good luck. It remains to be seen, of course, why some managed to take advantage of this kind of situation and others did not. These differences draw our attention to possible patterns of order and hierarchy that inform the organization of trade in Bluefields and the region.

For example, wholesalers tend to operate in an extended geographical space and maintain a large number of contacts, factors that are likely to increase their

chances of playing a central role (Braudel 1987b: 352-357). At the same time, they tend to diversify their operations, which makes them flexible and able to adjust to new circumstances. Retailers, on the other hand, usually do business in a restricted geographical area and tend to be more specialized. These characteristics are likely to constrain their options.

A case of growth and progress: Sun Wang Ling

The case of Sun Wang Ling, a young Chinese merchant, will give us one answer to the question of success, order, and hierarchy. Sun runs the biggest shop in town, selling household appliances, audio and video equipment, and luxury goods. In a few years, he has enlarged his business to a scale that very few people have reached or will ever reach on the coast. In April 1991, we estimated his inventory to be easily over US$100,000! At the same time, he was transforming his shop into what he called a supermarket of televisions, radios, freezers, ovens, sportswear, shoes, perfumes, and lotions.

He attributed his success to various factors. In the first place, he had established contacts based on trust with compatriots abroad through the recommendation of a Chinese uncle in Bluefields. These contacts that provided him with the necessary capital to invest on a larger scale. Second, he was convinced that the success of his business was due to his interest in economic progress and growth that he had inherited from his father. This interest meant taking new business initiatives, in his own words, "to try a reform." Stimulated by one of his Chinese suppliers, he moved from basic goods to luxury items and electric equipment. A third factor was the effects of hurricane Joan, which left the people without anything. His shift to another type of product coincided with the natural disaster and opened the door for him. As he told us, expensive or not, the people of Bluefields wanted to buy new televisions, radios, electric fans, etc., which they had lost to the wind and water. From then on, his network of customers has grown, not least because he offers products of relatively good quality. Moreover, he is ready to satisfy requests from customers for particular products and to offer special methods of payment.

His goal is to continue to progress, without forgetting to help friends if possible. For him to reach that personal objective and to help the country advance, Sun considers it imperative that Nicaragua achieve economic and political stability. This requires the cooperation of the two political parties UNO and FSLN. As an example of how he sees this, he referred to the capitalist system of the USA, where the main political parties coexist and guarantee an appropriate climate for investment.

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Other relatively successful traders in Bluefields also attribute their prosperity to their attitudes, skills, and commercial tactics. They mentioned hard work, offering low(er) prices, providing customers with loans, introducing new products, correct manners, and, above all, building trust as examples of the trading styles that had brought them to where they were. Ray Collins, the creole *buhonero* explained:

> To win the confidence of the people you have to know them and them have to know you. You have to be serious and go around to look the clients and that's why as *buhonero* you sell more than a standard person would sell. The majority of people here know me so I will come and say, "brother, you don't need any of these products I have here?" But maybe then he will tell me that he don't have money to buy. Then I would say, "brother, you [can] have that and next time you pay me, I just give you the product and I go." I give him the product and I play like I don't put it down, but when I reach home I go to work and put it down in my book not to forget! But that brother would say, "hey, that brother has a lot of confidence in me; he don't even put down my name..." But I know his name long time.

One of the very successful female wholesalers is Antonia Mendoza, a mestizo woman of about 45 years who delivers goods to an extensive network of 35 established (non-itinerant) retailers all over town. Her story draws our attention to the crucial importance of communication and negotiation skills, moral values, and the meaning of politics in everyday business.[20]

Talking others into business: Antonia Mendoza

> A trader is a politician! For example, I can say to you, "Look my dear, come here, look at this nice shirt, look at this beautiful pair of shoes, look at this delightful perfume." That is exactly the policy of a trader! Just as a politician who says that his party is going to win, we have to do the same with our products.
>
> I don't like to put pressure on my clients. I am a Christian woman, I am *evangélica* and I respect my clients very much, not to lose them because right now there is a lot of supply. Therefore, if I start to fight with my clients, they will drop me and look for somebody else, although they will never find someone like me.

Together with her second husband, who can usually be found in Managua attending to business, Antonia runs a wholesale business in mainly basic goods such as soap, flour, rice, sugar, and eggs. She works out of an annex to her house on a corner of Commercial Street. She also sells used items, clothes, shoes, and luxury goods. She started her business in 1965, changing from housewife to merchant after her first husband had abandoned her. She came to Bluefields with her brother on the suggestion of a creole protestant pastor to whom they are related.

According to Antonia, she "opened the market in Bluefields for the sale of eggs produced at poultry farms" (in the Pacific region), an initiative that filled a big gap. Since then, she has remained active in commerce, expanding through the continuing success of the sale of eggs. She has raised three children, two of whom are living in the USA and one in the city of León (Nicaragua); she now takes care of two of the four children of her daughter in Miami. From her children in the USA, she regularly receives clothing, shoes, perfume, money, and many other things that make life pleasant.

When she started her business, Antonia's best customers were many Chinese owners of wholesale-retail shops, Fabian Taylor, a creole wholesaler, and some mestizo owners of small shops.[21] After 1979, she continued to deal with Fabian Taylor and the shop owners. During the Sandinist government, she and other merchants managed to expand their business significantly and "make fortune," as she frankly explained to us, despite, or maybe thanks to, the control of the Sandinist Ministry of Trade, which guaranteed them 15% profit on everything.[22]

> During the Sandinist regime, the merchant who complained did so because he wanted to complain. Because the trader that worked with all his papers and licence, although we were controlled by MICOIN, made money. I made a fortune and I thank God, although I did not agree with the Sandinists. I am not a Sandinist nor a Somocist nor do I agree with this woman [Violeta Barrios de Chamorro] nor with anyone else. For me [there is] no president nor king. The boss in my house is Jesus Christ, he is the centre of my life. But we made money, yes! We made money with the Sandinists!

Antonia herself travels weekly to Managua to acquire merchandise at several companies, the Oriental Market, and from wholesalers with whom she has established good contacts. Her strategy is to deal directly with the owners or managers of enterprises. She greets them in a friendly way, chats about flowers and bees, and settle her affairs at once, including payment of purchased commodities. This style of doing business with suppliers ("trade policy" as she calls it) and the relations of trust and respect that are build upon it are crucial factors in Antonia's success.

She has developed similar contacts with the entrepreneurs in charge of transporting her goods, including the truck driver who does the Managua-Rama route, the boat captain on the Escondido River, and the local chauffeur responsible for delivery at home. The kind and amount of goods she buys are defined by the demands of her customers at the other end of the network.

Transactions with customers are almost entirely based on credit; they have to pay Antonia within eight to fifteen days, although she is willing to be flexible, as the second of the above quotations proves. With these customers, she maintains a "great friendship, not only because they help me, but also because I help them." She had to admit however, that recently she decided to break relations with several customers when they had not paid their debts after more than one month.

On her way to success, Antonia met some obstacles that, for shorter or longer periods, caused economic damage to her enterprise. A few years ago, the boat on which her merchandise was transported, sank on its way from Rama to Bluefields. Fortunately, she found someone who was willing to lend her money to buy new goods. With hurricane Joan, she lost a considerable amount of rum and powdered milk, which was stolen from the storage buildings at the wharf in Rama. This time she had to bear the misfortune on her own.

The devaluations by the Sandinist (February 1988) and UNO government (March 1991) were also hard blows, according to Antonia. She suffered especially from one in March 1991 because she was unprepared. These measures also affected

her indirectly, as people saw the value of their money drastically reduced. However, once more her ability to establish good relations proved useful. When the price of eggs increased, because of a shortage at the national level, and threatened to curtail her supply, she went to see the owners of the poultry farm. The result? She got the amount that she wanted to buy!

In April 1991, when the regional price regulation commission fixed maximum prices for basic products, including eggs, she used the same method. She went to the government building in Bluefields to negotiate with the head of the commission. The outcome? She could sell her eggs at the price she wanted!

The accumulation of relatively large amounts of capital, however, is not the only criterion for success as people perceive it. Some define progress in more moderate terms as moving from the sale of one sort of product to another, or from a few to a variety of goods. For them, as in the case of Winston who began trade in 1987 as a way to escape the economic crisis, starting from "below" implies selling crops that are produced regionally, such as cassava, plantain, and bananas. To advance means, little by little, increasing one's capital to allow investment in crops and products that come from other regions. In his eyes, his ability to do this illustrates his success.

The case of Ray Collins is interesting because he sees the issue of accumulation from a particular point of view. A trader for him can be compared with any other worker who deserves to receive a salary for the job he or she does. That is what Ray is doing: paying himself a salary that, during the time of the research, was about US$300 a month. According to Ray, this salary was both a sign of success and the simple result of a right.

Surviving: making consumption and trade ends meet

> For us the *chambeadores* (*chamba*: small job) the situation is very difficult, because commerce does not maintain stable prices. We do not earn enough money to live a decent life. Moreover, the *chambas* are very scarce. However, this doesn't interest any merchant. Their only interest is to gain more money and each time on our expense. Now, they should not come with this idea of free trade, because we are the ones that are suffering, not them!
> (**Roland Hodgson**, a creole *chambeador*)

In Bluefields, where, despite the economic crisis, many people receive money from family abroad, some merchants succeed in accumulating relatively large amounts of capital. The cases of Sun Wang Ling and Antonia Mendoza demonstrate this. A small group of wholesalers and entrepreneurs like Sun have taken over from the large commercial houses mainly run by Chinese and Arab merchants before 1979. Some in this group are newcomers, others started their careers during the Somoza regime and have managed, through ups and downs, to make a fortune, as Antonia Mendoza told us.

In spite of the success of these men and women, for many people trade is principally a way to "keep their heads above the water." In other words, given the absence of viable alternatives in the region, commerce is a means to subsist. Some weeks one succeeds in satisfying the basic needs of the household; other weeks one does not. Meals may be reduced to one a day.[23] The acquisition of new clothes, shoes, and school materials has to be postponed. Some months, one is able to repay outstanding debts; other months debts only accumulate.

Increasing competition and the **double edge** of the adjustment and stabilization plans of both the Sandinist and UNO governments have forced most of the people who live at the subsistence level into more poverty and misery. I use the image of the double edge, because the measures affect the men and women and their families as consumers **and** as entrepreneurs. In this sense, our research confirms some of the main conclusions of the ENVIO study that I cited in the introduction of this chapter. The words of Roland Hodgson tell us the same thing. Although instability has always been a feature of the business activities of these men and women, now it has become the primary characteristic. As long as the macroeconomic perspectives remain dark at the national and regional levels, there seems to be little hope that insecurity will decrease.

This situation is illustrated by the case of Betty Jordan, one of the few creole owners of a *pulperia* that gives her and her household a small income.[24]

Have we lost before the battle begins?: the case of Betty Jordan

Betty made her debut in the world of trade in about 1965, traveling to Managua where she bought vegetables and tissues to sell in Bluefields. Simultaneously, she sold coastal coconuts to marketers from the capital. Still frustrated, she explained to us that in those days the merchants "from there" (Managua) did not allow coastal traders to "settle themselves *así nomás*," (without pardon) to sell in the capital, even though the Managuans came to the coast to trade whatever they liked **without** being disturbed by anyone.

She also vividly remembers that in those days the majority of shop owners in town were creoles. Mestizos were almost absent. Whether this is true, is doubtful. However, it points out the importance of memories and the impact of past experience on access to resources through the establishment of social contacts. These clearly influence the present-day character of Betty's enterprise and her point of views on related questions. I will return to this issue in the concluding paragraph of this chapter.

> The reason why there are no creoles in the commercial sector is because we like to work without having problems with nobody! Besides, we are not people that will stand for our rights. You have to remember that before at the corner of the Commercial Street only creoles used to sell bread, but they have been displaced little by little by merchants that have come from the Pacific. Today there are maybe one or two creole women that sell bread, and if that was all, they have been pushed to second rank while *las pañas* [from *españoles*, by which she means mestizos] are on the front row!

> And instead of making a scandal, these creoles prefer to leave and cede the place to those who have found a good living at the expense of us. And what does the government do to avoid this displacement? Nothing! The government does not care about merchants. The government does not mind that Bluefields is becoming one big market. Because that is what is happening right now!...
>
> We creoles, we give up even before the battle begins.... We creoles, we don't like to fight. We want to live in Christianity. If we would not be so passive, we would go and make competition to these people and for sure we will win! In my own house I have an example: my husband is so passive that I have to defend the rights of the two of us!...

Three years later, she opened a small shop selling plantain, bananas, cassava, quequisque, coconut oil, and rice, which she bought directly from coastal producers who came to offer their products on the town wharf. She still runs this shop, which has undergone several transformations, up and down, just as the support of her husband Marvin and her children has gone through different stages.

Shortly after the revolution of 1979, the Sandinist government proposed that all retailers convert their shops into so-called *expendios*, distribution points supplied by the state-owned company ENABAS under the supervision of the Ministry of Trade. Initially, Betty did not accept this proposition, because her husband did not agree.

Given the difficulty of purchasing basic grain on their own (at that time still largely controlled by ENABAS/MICOIN), they decided to focus on the preparation and sale of *nacatamales*. They bought some pigs and raised them for their meat, one of the basic ingredients of this national dish. However, on the insistence of the government and because of the problem concerning basic grains, Betty finally agreed to turn her shop into an *expendio*.

From that point on, she had to run her business on her own, because Marvin refused to help; he believed that they were controlled by the Sandinists, which he did not like at all. According to Betty, they were able to make a reasonable living until hurricane Joan put an end to it.[25] She summarized the effects of Joan as follows: "Mamita, we lost everything, even the little bit of money that we had got wet and spoiled. Part of my merchandise I had, was bought with cash, but another part with credit. Fortunately, the government cancelled my debt."

Not long after the reconstruction of Bluefields had begun, the Sandinist government decided to do away with the *expendios* and liberalize trade in basic grains. At about the same time, some relatives that Betty has in the USA sent her money — "a gift that fell from heaven." She used it to reopen her shop and obtain a new licence, this time in her husband's name.

In fact, since this new start, Marvin is the one who manages the business ("no longer do the Sandinists exercise control...") while Betty concentrates on church affairs and her piano lessons. Once a week, he buys vegetables from a man who brings them from Managua. He has a standing order with this man, by which he can select the vegetables that he considers to be in good condition. Other products he buys from different wholesalers in town.

For the transport of their merchandise, they also have a fixed contact, and, according to Betty, the *carretonero* who works for them earns a better monthly salary than a teacher just from the money they pay him! In dealing with customers, they decided not to extend credit any more, after several bad experiences with people who would not or could not pay them.

Despite the ups and downs, they continue to make a modest living, although, since the March 1991 adjustment measures of the UNO government, trade has slowed considerably as their customers do not have enough money to buy all they need. Daily, Betty is confronted with the increasing poverty in her neighbourhood, making her wonder what is going wrong in Nicaragua:

> It is so sad to see the child of a large family coming to our shop to buy half a pound of sugar.... That is how we realize that she belongs to a poor family that doesn't have money. Sometimes they come to ask me to give away half a pound of rice. What I do then is give them a part of what I had planned to use in my own kitchen and later I try to stretch out what has been left. Because I cannot give away what I have for sale. I would have no profits.... Today I asked to the Lord why we are being punished, why we do not have the freedom to eat and drink what our body needs. I ask myself, is it because our government is working badly? Is it because we only think of ourselves? Or what?

When we initiated our study on trade, one of the things we asked ourselves was why, apparently, only a few creole male and female entrepreneurs could be found in Bluefields, considering their representation in the whole population.[26] Was this impression right? And if so, what was the explanation(s)? Were there answers to our search for the role of ethnic relations in local commerce?[27] As we have already seen in this chapter, other ethnic groups have played an important role in coastal commerce. However, whereas the importance of Chinese and Arabs clearly changed in July 1979, with respect to creole influence, we cannot find such a turning point.

My aim in this section is to look, briefly and tentatively, at how ethnicity might influence certain trade practices and vice versa. To begin this task, we decided to ask traders, creole and mestizo (as all the others turned out to be) alike, about this issue. From them we learned several things.

Fabian Taylor, a creole wholesaler and owner of a shop in the street that leads to the market building, answered our question with a reference to history. As he pointed out, before 1979 creoles were the best situated employees of the foreign companies that operated on the coast. This tradition and their interest in looking for work outside Bluefields explains why not many creoles are in business today. On the other hand, according to Fabian, there are several creole *pulperias* in town, because, if they become involved in trade, creoles prefer to do business at home rather than in the streets. Also, as Fabian told us, local creole merchants have been displaced by others coming from the Pacific who did a better business, bringing more and cheaper products.

This last explanation was also given by Ray Collins: "The Spaniards [mestizos] from Managua who bring the products affect part of the commerce. The people who are not from the community [Bluefields] are working here and the people from here are not working." Ray also had another interpretation: "Creole people they don't like no one to hauling and pulling them around. And many don't have the patience to trust people and the people may trust them. In other words, they like to live fast." The argument about the lack of patience was raised in more or less the same words by Petronila, a seller of vegetables in the old market and daughter of a creole father and mestizo mother.

Betty Jordan's interpretation of ethnicity "at work" reveals the complexity of the issue. On the one hand, she stresses that creoles have been displaced by mestizos. However, this was possible because of their own passivity, which she attributes to particular values and norms, **and** the absence of guarantees from the government that creoles can occupy the places that they have always occupied. In her eyes, this (lack of) protection is a political condition sine qua non. That the government does not fulfill it, she does not appreciate. On the other hand, Betty, herself a creole, and is by no means passive or unable to stand up for her rights either before her husband at home or in the streets. Hence, she herself makes a conscious effort to maintain her place.

Politics: at home and in the streets

In Chapter 4, I discussed in detail the significance of the creation of a price-control commission in the town of Bluefields in April 1991. This drew attention to many features of the relation between politics and trade at the regional level. However, as some of the episodes in the lives of merchants described in this chapter explicitly demonstrate, politics in Bluefields is more than just the major events, such as the announcement of an economic adjustment plan or the creation of a price regulation commission. Therefore, we have to relate the meaning of politics to aspects of the everyday struggles of traders to make a living — struggles that people themselves define as eminently political. Because of this they clearly challenge the centralist and official visions shared by Nicaraguan "professional" politicians at national and regional levels, whether they belong to the FSLN or UNO. As I argued in Chapter 2, many men and women consider common and seemingly insignificant experiences related to individual, household, or collective interests as prominently political.

As the narrative of Antonia Mendoza aptly illustrates, the form in which she establishes and maintains relations with customers and suppliers for her means being a politician as much as her prompt initiative to visit the head of the price regulation commission to talk about the price of eggs. In both ways, she invests time, experience, and skills to **negotiate** the conditions that guarantee the growth of her business.

This perception of politics is shared by many of the merchants whose activities we followed and whom we interviewed. I would even argue that the numerous merchants who expressed their disillusionment and frustrations about the promises

of politicians in terms of indifference are another manifestation of this phenomenon. What they demand from the authorities is to be left alone to do their business. In a way, with this attitude, they are asking the UNO politicians what the concept of "free" in the "free trade" ideology actually means and forcing them to look at the issue.

The stories of many market women tell us that they do not wait passively for the authorization of "officials" to enter business and become economic and political agents in the world of trade in Bluefields. Through their entrance into this world, certainly often a risky and difficult initiative, they (consciously or not) restructure gender and family relations both at home and in the street. These 1001 efforts at making politics do, in the end, constitute the patterns of change and development, no matter how time- and energy-consuming they might be and how much resistance they might receive from men. As Maritza, the leader of the small-traders' cooperative, told us:

> For me it is impossible to stay the whole day at home. I feel like I will become drowned there. I have passed so much time already resolving problems and working for the cooperative that I simply cannot return to the past, not even to stay one Sunday subjugated at home! Even if I would marry again, I will not accept that from any man!

The changes that the members, mostly women, have experienced in the evolution of this cooperative are another example of the attempts to guarantee (improved) economic and political conditions for making a living. The cooperative, like that of the *carretoneros*, was promoted by the Sandinist government to provide the merchants better access to basic products and credit. However, the members soon found out that these goals were merely empty promises and good intentions, due to the scarcity of goods and the chosen distribution policy.

Because of this failure, many merchants of the cooperative opposed the Sandinists. Then, in the middle of the 1990 election campaign, they grasped an alternative offered by the regional UNO party. Under the name of "*Nuevo Amanecer*" (new dawn or awakening) the cooperative joined the rows of UNO supporters in the hope that this time they would be more successful in acquiring credit and basic products.[28]

At the time of our research, many of them had lost all confidence in the regional UNO leaders. As a reflection of this, they changed "*Nuevo Amanecer*" for the neutral-sounding "Cooperative of Small Merchants." They learned another political lesson.

Others relate politics, indeed, first of all to political events at the government level, national or regional. Elisabeth, a mestizo woman born in the Pacific region and mother of seven children, prepares and sells food in the old market building. Since 1966, she has made her living by working from four o' clock in the morning until five or six in the afternoon.

She attributes the hard times she is going through to the incapacity of the new government to fulfill its promises to build factories and create new jobs. At the

same time, however, she observes that nobody these days is doing anything to change the situation or to help them. This is in sharp contrast to the times of "don Daniel [Ortega], when there was a place where they formed a kind of committee and someone organized the collection of money [among the sellers of food] to buy everything that was necessary for all of us."

Although speaking with great respect for "don Daniel" Ortega, Elisabeth also pointed out the big political mistake he made of "sending our children to the mountains to fight against those men of age [the Contras], who had a lot of experience and were well trained while these children, you know..."

Conclusion

> We have different states. Some gain more than others to be frankly speaking. Some gain nothing. Some businesses fail.

I think that the repetition of Ray Collins' characterization of commerce in Bluefields is a proper opening for the concluding remarks of this chapter. The heterogeneity of small enterprises within certain boundaries is probably the most noteworthy feature of the local trade that I have described and examined by focusing on a series of key analytical issues.

Moving beyond simple dualistic analysis in terms of legal/illegal activities, formal/informal sectors or non-capitalist/capitalistmodes of production, my goal has been to identify the ways in which people are actually organizing their affairs through specific sets of commoditized and non-commoditized relations, particularly cultural devices and everyday political struggles directed at the maintenance or transformation of their enterprises.

As we have seen, even the highly capital-intensive businesses of Sun Wang Ling and Antonia Mendoza function because of the use of various crucial non-commoditized relations. At the same time, the many enterprises that balance on the fragile thread of subsistence, making use of non-commidified relations are also heavily committed to commodity exchange.

The stories of many women merchants demonstrate furthermore that getting into business does not only serve to provide three meals of rice and beans a day. For them, making a living through trade has become a means of creating space to defend other than mere economic interests, e.g., to forget or get rid of violent and drunken husbands. We have seen that, in this process, distinctive trading styles become apparent that are a crucial constituent of the world of trade. Only a detailed analysis of the interplay of these dimensions contributes to an understanding of the growth and persistence of small commodity businesses as they constitute the diverse forms of contemporary trade in the region of Bluefields.

In the section on getting (back) into business, we saw that there is no single determining factor that explains why and how people become involved in commerce. Facing more or less similar macroeconomic conditions, the actual forms in which they turn to trade depend on access to vital resources, skills, motivation

and imagination, and coincidence or luck. To trace the paths of business careers, it is important to consider different levels of analysis; practices of individuals, household, and enterprise might overlap, but they also might be divided.

Simultaneously, there might be important differences among individuals, as the examples of women traders reveal. This is one of the main aspects that theories on the informal sector fail to take into account. The critical "breaking points," such as the hurricane and economic adjustment measures, indicate the vital role of a network of social relations with suppliers, customers, friends, and people who work within state institutions. Our stories seem to confirm that the people who have established regular contacts with bureaucrats and (professional) politicians have certainly benefitted from the resources that are being mobilized through the state apparatus. In this sense there is continuity from the Sandinist government to the new national and regional governments headed by the UNO. Moreover diversification of commercial activities seems to be of major importance in overcoming times of crisis (ENVIO, July 1991: 40-41).

I have argued that this new trade configuration at the regional level requires us to rethink the notion of market. The making of the market takes places in 1001 specific time-space contexts in which the rules of the game are continuously being (re)negotiated. At a general level, this requires an understanding of the location of the town of Bluefields within the Nicaraguan economy and within the Caribbean domain of trade. The geographic distance to the Pacific region and Managua, in particular, relate to the lack of reliable means of communication and condition the creation of specific economic rules, e.g., higher prices due to complex transport requirements. Within the region, a similar situation exits between Bluefields and the communities. In town, finally, there are also clearly visible spatial divisions, most notably between the central and surrounding neighbourhoods.

However, as I have attempted to underline with the discussion of the market concept, these conditions/divisions are being (re)defined in seemingly insignificant everyday actions, a process that, in turn, has generated a completely new dynamic with many unintended consequences. Goods, services, and loans are exchanged and prices defined in specific locales, often influenced by non-economic relations based on family and friendships, political affinity, and differences in social status.

It is in these contexts that degrees and forms of commoditization become reality. And in some cases, as we have seen, items do not become (pure) commodities at all. It seems to me that heterogeneity of petty commodity enterprises has become a primary feature of the coastal economy, because making a living with trade is not only founded upon "rational" economic behaviour that consists simply of accumulating capital. It is influenced by gender, ethnic, and cultural values and relations. The expansion of trade does not automatically lead toward the commoditization of everything. Therefore, we should look critically at "new" dualistic tendency models, such as those presented by ENVIO.

Gender relations and divisions play an omnipresent role in the world of trade in Bluefields. To understand this, we have to look at the everyday practices and experiences of women and men, as they move from the home to the streets, harbour, boats, trucks, and (wholesale) companies, from home to *casa de gobierno*,

and back home. It is through these practices and experiences that different gender roles are constructed and transformed. It is through the same practices that different cultural discourses come into being: discourses that in turn influence the growth of these practices.

I would argue that the significant role of women in commerce, although we should not lose sight on the differences among them, has become another principal feature of the world of trade in Bluefields. For many women, trading has become an all encompassing activity, in the fullest sense of **making** a living. Thus, they contribute significantly to the social construction of the **world of trade**. It is not just "commercialized housework" or "disguised wage labour." Neither does it mean that women jump continuously back and forth from domestic work or mode of production to petty commerce or the commoditized mode of production, nor from the domestic sphere to the stages of politics. Once again, these dualistic concepts lag far behind the changes that are taking place in everyday life.

The influence of ethnicity is above all ambiguous, as it operates in various ways at different social levels. Obviously, our study does not provide definite answers, but rather some paths that should guide further research and analysis. Historically, different ethnic groups have occupied different places in the occupational hierarchy, principle, or social mechanism that has been a structural feature of the Atlantic Coast economy.

In Bluefields, the dominant Chinese and Arabs have given way to mestizo merchants, who have clearly dominated creoles by sheer numbers in several occupational categories (wholesalers, retailers, street vendors) and at strategic locations in town. However, the experiences and interpretations of this process vary among creoles, as do their reactions to it.

I hope that throughout this chapter it has become apparent that petty commodity traders are not ideologically defenseless, as the authors of the ENVIO articles stated. The livelihood practices of traders force us to achieve a much fuller understanding of politics. They show us, by suiting actions to words, that political struggles are not limited to party or government politics. They engage in political struggle at home and in the street for the maintenance or modification of their interests, on many occasions returning to non-commoditized relations.

Women traders play a crucial role in these political struggles making clear that work is not just what they do, but that it includes the conditions under which they perform, perceive, and value it. That they express these struggles in terms that cannot be found in the writings of social scientists or politicians (based on class consciousness, revolutionary beliefs, or the defense of democratic rights) does not make them apolitical. That politicians and social scientists have problems tracing and comprehending these rapid adaptations of men and women involved in very practical livelihood questions is, of course, another issue.

Notes

1. This chapter is, in large part, based on fieldwork done between April and July 1991 by a team of researchers. Members of this team were: Noreen White, Roberto Rigby, Kevin Campbell (related to the CIDCA office in Bluefields), and Gabriel Torres (the Agricultural University of Wageningen). So far two articles on the findings of this miniproject on trade and the market of Bluefields have been published (Vernooy et al. 1992; Torres and Vernooy 1992a). Another article is forthcoming (Torres and Vernooy 1992b).

2. See also Torres and Vernooy 1992a. For women's studies that deal with similar questions, see Molyneux 1985: 227-254 (Nicaragua); MacEwen Scott 1986: 21-27 (Latin America); Nash and Safa 1986 (Latin America); Afshar 1991; and Moore 1991.

3. Some of the authors who have written extensively on Nicaragua and the Sandinist revolution pay hardly any attention to the crucial importance of trade and traders (mostly small-scale but not exclusively). See, for example, Vilas 1987, 1990b; Vilas and Harris 1985. With reference to the work of Carlos Vilas, I do not know if one or both of the reasons that I have mentioned, help to explain this striking absence of interest.

4. Here he cites the work of de Haan (1987). The Nicaraguan expression of the wide range of economic activities is *bisnear* or being involved in *bisne*. In the section on the World of trade in Bluefields, I provide examples of these kinds of businesses.

5. The majority of these studies define (an) informal as someone who is not a professional, does not work for the state or a church, is not employed as a worker who pays for his/her social security according to state regulations, and is not an employee of an enterprise with more than five wage workers. Domestic servants, an important group, are included in this definition of informal (Chamorro et al. 1989: 163-164).

6. A study by de Franco (1979), based on data from 1977, shows that, at that time, the informal sector comprised people involved in trade (35.2%), services (20.3%), transport (2.7%), food preparation (7.7%), and manufacturing (34.1%). Although these percentages do not tell us anything about possible multiple enterprises, they indicate the diverse nature of informal activities. In 1983, a study by the Centro de Investigación y Asesoria Socio-Económica (CINASE) identified some important changes in the informal sector compared to the results of de Franco's work. Among these changes were the increased autonomy of the informal sector versus the formal manifested by an increase in the acquisition of goods and inputs from within informal circuits. On the other hand, the formal sector, including the state, had become an increasingly important client of the informal one. Third, more and more people who were employed within the formal sector had become involved partly and part-time in informal activities. These interesting results demonstrate another of the problems with the rather rigidly used definitions of (in)formality.

7. According to UNO government data, the 200,000 salaried workers of the formal sector lost 34% of their purchase power as a consequence of the March 1991 measures. However, the 300,000 people employed in the informal sector (marketers, owners of small shops, artisans, carpenters, itinerant traders, providers of basic services, owners of small workshops) lost 50% of their buying capacity (ENVIO, July 1991: 37). These figures are averages. Based on its own calculations, ENVIO observes that for example, the subsector of marketers lost 72% and the subsector of artisans and providers of services, 60% of their purchasing power (ibid: 37).

8. Until we left Bluefields in October 1991, no foreign, transnational, or national large industrial, commercial, or financial company was established in town or on the Atlantic Coast.

9. Based on a survey conducted at the beginning of 1990, Bruce Barrett estimated the population of Bluefields at 30,175 in 5167 household units. A census in 1984 estimated the population at 25,800 (CDS-Bluefields). If we compare these two figures, the annual average growth rate for Bluefields between 1984 and 1990 would be 3.4% or 0.1% above the national growth rate.

10. The treasurer of the municipality of Bluefields, from 1990 in charge of the registration of traders, explained that she uses 18 categories to classify commercial activities. When asked to give an indication of the number of traders, she grouped these categories into four kinds of merchants. In January 1991, the following approximate numbers of these merchants were registered, for a total of 1525:

- 350 *pulperias* or retail shops;
- 275 sellers of cigarettes, chewing gum, and chips;
- 500 sellers of general merchandise; and
- 400 sellers of alcoholic drinks.

However, between January and the end of April 1991, about 500 new traders had been registered, bringing the total to 2025. Among these 2025 she estimated that there were 10 wholesalers. Several merchants and politicians, whom we interviewed, told us that about 50% of the vendors were not registered. If we take this percentage for granted, although it might be somewhat exaggerated, the total number would be 3037. Assuming that in each household only one person registers, this would mean that one in every two households was involved in some kind of trade.

In January 1987, the Ministry of Internal Trade in Bluefields had 692 registered traders, including sellers of food and drink. Among these were 263 retailers and owners of small shops (MICOIN-Zona Especial II 1987). At the end of September 1988, the number had increased to 1206 merchants: 757 so-called established, 171 itinerant, and 253 involved in different kinds of services such as bars, restaurants, and hotels. According to the director of MICOIN at that time, this represented about 80% of all traders. Hence, the total would be 1508. Comparing the estimated 3037 for 1991 with the 1508 of 1988, this means an increase of 200% in two and a half years. If we compare the 1991 data with the 1987 number, it gives a 404% growth over four years. It should be clear that these calculations have to be taken with a caveat.

11. For example, the abovementioned treasurer told us, "It is up to the conscience of the people to pay [municipal] taxes. I contact everybody and the persons that come, I give four months to pay." Notwithstanding this principle and her observation that many traders defraud openly by paying fewer taxes than they should, she declared that "right now there are not many illegals, because the controllers are going from neighbourhood to neighbourhood" (interview, 26 April 1991). The woman responsible for the Department of the Administration of Rents (situated in the town hall, although formally part of the Ministry of Finance), was clearer. In charge of the collection of sales taxes, she admitted that there were many illegals and that there was always tax evasion (interview, 29 April 1991).

12. Part of the trade takes places through contraband as fishermen **exchange** their catch (lobster, turtles) with traders from Colombia or San Andres for luxury goods, such as liquor, jeans, shoes, and stereo equipment. These goods are used for personal use or sold in the communities or Bluefields. Via the same route, another item is being traded in alarmingly increasing quantities: drugs. Corn Island and the coastal communities (Tasba Pounie, Pearl

Lagoon, Sandy Bay Sirpi) are used as springboards by South American drug dealers and their connection with the other Central American countries, Mexico, and the USA.

13. In Bluefields, there is a creole entrepreneur who has established a service for receiving remittances from the USA. According to Kevin Campbell, one of our research assistants who knows this man well, about US$35,000 a month comes in through this channel. Historically, it has been mainly the creole families who maintain ties with family abroad, although since the outbreak of the war and the emigration of tens of thousands of Nicaraguans, this contact exists among the other ethnic groups also. The "dollarization" of the Nicaraguan economy is a very complex issue that merits more research.

14. This conversation took place on 11 February 1989 while we were both waiting at the airport of Managua to take the "one-never-knows-if-and-at-what-time" plane to Bluefields.

15. Many traders have lost all faith in repeated promises of the regional government to construct "mini-markets" in various peripheral neighbourhoods to control the expansion of trade and decentralize marketing.

16. At the time of our research, women occupied 70 of the 92 stands inside the old market buildings. In the street that leads to the old market, women ran 42 of the 47 stands or shops (based on data provided by the market attendant).

17. Our study encompassed 30 cases of men and women involved in trade. A first selection of cases was made on the basis of knowledge and contacts of the three research assistants from Bluefields and my own observations during my years on the coast. As we entered little by little into the world of trade, the people we interviewed set us on the path to other cases, as did our field observations on the streets. In this process, the female vendors, especially, convinced us to study how they were experiencing **as women** this world and the many problems they were confronted with (Torres and Vernooy 1992a). As I observed, we aimed to include contrasting cases in terms of poor-rich, male-female, mestizo-creole, experienced traders-newcomers, member or non-member of the Chamber of Commerce or a cooperative, to get insight into the variety of merchants and trading practices.

18. The field material for this story was collected by Roberto Rigby in May 1991. The construction and narrative of the case are mine. This also applies to the cases that follow.

19. "*Los turcos*" is the popular but incorrect collective noun that people on the Atlantic Coast use to describe emigrants from several countries around the Mediterranean. Although some of them might have been Turks, the majority were Palestinians with a Turkish passport. Before 1979, in Bluefields and in other places in Nicaragua, they controlled much of the trade in clothes, cloth, shoes, dressing equipment, and cosmetics. Some owned shops in towns, but many were itinerant traders. They came to Bluefields via Managua and the Colombian island of San Andres. They left the country when the Sandinists triumphed.

20. The fieldwork for this case was done by Gabriel Torres and Roberto Rigby in May 1991.

21. Her first customers were two Chinese brothers. Only on the basis of their recommendation she was able to extend her trade to the other Chinese merchants. We have seen this same basic practice at work in the case of Sun Wang Ling. Antonia said that, literally, this "opened the doors for me."

22. According to Antonia, she runs her business completely legally, by which she means maintaining orderly bookkeeping (for which she pays an accountant) and paying taxes comme il faut.

23. As schoolteachers told us, the number of young children who come to school without eating breakfast are numerous. As a consequence, in the middle of class someone may faint. Restricting consumption, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is in many cases the only "solution" people have for survival under these conditions (see also, ENVIO, July 1991: 39-40).

24. The data for this case were collected by Noreen White in April and May 1991 based on interviews and participant observation in Betty's shop.

25. Lidia who also ran an *expendio* during the Sandinist regime, told me that they did not make any money with it. What is more, she hated to organize distribution and sales in those days because it required a lot of work and administration. She kept the *expendio*, although it "drove her crazy," to guarantee access to basic products for her own household.

26. It seems that this characteristic had existed for quite some time already. In 1930, a creole reporter for *The Bluefields Weekly* wrote on 10 May:

> Have you ever been to the market? Well, this is what we have seen there. Not one tenth of the vendors that are to be seen there are native creoles. In the olden days this condition did not exist; every man had his little garden of vegetables and poultry to sell and for his consumption. But what a change today, on every side we see retrogression among our people...."

27. We did not study traders of Miskito or Rama origins. Although men and women of both ethnic groups are involved in commerce, I do not have information about their specific roles, nor about their relative representation among traders in Bluefields and the region.

28. Many rumours could be heard in those days about the UNO offering money to people in exchange for support and votes. Although it is confirmed that the party received a lot of money from the US government (indirectly) to organize the election campaign, I do not know how much was handed out to the regional bureau of the UNO or if they used money to buy votes.

PART III
TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF COASTAL HISTORY

A THOUSAND-AND-ONE STORIES STILL TO TELL

Living on the Coast of Central America,
right on the edge of the Caribbean Sea.
So many miles away from Africa
another branch of the same old tree.
We are walking through the pages of our history
to find out where we are all coming from.
Miskito kings, pirates and slavery
coconut, cassava and chacalin...
Rock down, rock down Central America,
raise your voices and sing for peace.
Rock down, rock down Central America,
we are the people fighting to be free.
The Soul Vibrations "Rock down Central America"[1]

Until now, the recent history of the Atlantic Coast has been written mainly as a fragmented account of a series of external interventions and their mainly negative consequences for the coastal population, the economy, and the ecology of the region. In it, the external interventions of foreign, especially US, companies in search of vital economic resources, US military troops defending political-geographic interests, and the Moravian Church with its mission to spread its belief and religious practices are described in some detail. These are complemented with the stories of other interventions, this time by national forces that have their origins in the Pacific region. In general, the latter are captured in the re-ified images of the arrival and penetration of the Somocist state and the Sandinist revolution. According to this version of coastal history, these intervention have marked, at least until 1979, the patterns of a highly uneven capitalist "development."

Socioeconomically, the main results of this process have been social backwardness, severe poverty, contamination of rivers and deforestation on a large scale, the creation of an ethnic occupational hierarchy and strong inter-ethnic divisions, and a constraint on the development of a national market in capital, goods, and services. Politically and culturally, it has led to the formation of a strong coastal identity opposed to "the Spaniards" or the mestizo population/culture of the Pacific region. Furthermore, it has contributed to the perception of the Nicaraguan state as an ignorant, dominating, and hostile outsider. For coastal people, it is argued, the national state has become nothing more than the prolonging of Spanish colonialism.

This negative attitude toward the state goes hand in hand with a positive attitude toward British and US involvement in coastal history. Examples of studies that portrait coastal history essentially in this way are: *La Mosquitia en la revolución*

(CIERA 1981); *El desafío indígena en Nicaragua: El caso de los miskitos* (Jenkins 1986); *Autonomy and development: the Atlantic Coast of Nicargua* (Sollis 1990); and, probably the most outstanding in this series, *Del colonialismo a la autonomía: modernización capitalista y revolución social en la Costa Atlántica* (Vilas 1990).[2]

The accounts of these Nicaraguan and non-Nicaraguan authors alike — mostly based on secondary sources — are primarily stories of the coming and going of rubber, mining, lumber, banana, and fishing companies; the arrival of Moravian pastors; the military occupation of Bluefields by US marines; the Somocist bureaucrats from Managua; and the Sandinist politicians and bureaucrats from Managua. Although these descriptions and explanations consider the effects of these intervention on the lives of the coastal people, they represent primarily the perspective (ideas and interests) of the various intervenors.

This is both their strength and weakness. Strength because coastal history cannot be understood without this side of the picture, as these (often violent) interventions have shaped the specific patterns of change in the region. Weakness, because they do not deal adequately with the different ways in which the coastal people have tried to come to terms with these interventions, more or less successfully. In other words, they do not describe how people as subjects of history (see Thompson 1978) have not only passively, but actively tried and succeeded in shaping their own lives and histories, economically, politically, and culturally.

These observations relate directly to the discussions about commoditization and policymaking presented in Chapter 1. Concerning the time factor as perceived in these processes, we can conclude that, in general, dualist and articulationist theories share a common, ideal-type perception of the different stages of social change. On the other hand, models that depict change in more continuous or gradual terms tend to attribute to the process a systemic predetermination or teleological drive of a key force, most notably, capitalism as a reified system or social agent (Booth 1985; Llambi 1990). All these models fail in one way or another to take into account the diversity of a society in which we may find different forms of production, social structures, cultures, languages, styles of living, and mentalities. In the words of the French historian Braudel (1989b [1979]: 439):

> The hierarchical structure is never simple because a society means diversity and pluralism; she is divided against her will and this division is probably her innermost nature.

Thus, these complementary or alternative accounts, I believe, still need to be researched and written. They should complement, and in some form correct, the above-outlined versions of coastal history.[3] In this part, I aim to contribute to this alternative version, which focuses in the first place on the multifaceted life-worlds of the people and their "projects." My goal is to learn about change primarily through the experiences of individuals as actors embedded in social units and relations: experiences that encompass accumulated knowledge, skills, and material and cultural resources on the basis of which people have made a living and continue to solve problems of livelihood.

However, to make use of this theoretical or analytical approach, one requires a different methodology. This methodology should look for primary resources and avoid framing coastal history in **one particular** model stamped with the seal "made abroad" (be this the USA or the Pacific region of Nicaragua). Therefore, we should elaborate various kinds of life-stories, including labour or career stories, and do all possible to search for documents written by coastal people themselves: diaries, testimonies, letters, files and archives, pamphlets, newspapers, magazines, and books.[4] Through the use of these techniques, one should look for new and additional keys to the interpretation of coastal history and how people's identities come about. Such a history is defined not only by the actors who make the most "noise," but should also identify the thousand-and-one other stories, the more silent and seemingly insignificant ones. This should show us that changes do not occur at one pace, but at many different ones, some that might proceed very slowly (Braudel 1989a [1968]: 24). Braudel also shows us how change and continuity form part of historical processes. To document and analyze these, we have to look at both the events of everyday life and the structures of the *longue durée*, which often contain obstacles and counterforces to the forces that drive major transformations.

Several researchers at the Research and Documentation Center of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA) have begun this challenging task by collecting oral histories about the town of Bluefields (Sujo Wilson 1991: 32-39); the collection of so-called "anancy" stories of the ineffable spy-man and other creole tales that form part of the cultural heritage of the creole people in the Caribbean (WANI, May/August 1991: 38-59). With Virgilio Rivera, I have presented fragments of the labour story of a miskito man nicknamed "*El Dama*" to describe how he has experienced recent and past history of the miskito people living in the Coco River area. Far from being complete, this story attempted to open the window to similar endeavours that will tell us the stories of the miskitos as they have lived and continue to live them (Rivera and Vernooy 1991: 15-37).

In this Part, I will build upon these studies by presenting another labour story (Chapter 6) and a revised interpretation of changes that have taken place since 1880 (Chapter 7). In both chapters, I will present material that so far has been widely unknown and unused in research studies. This material includes articles from several newspapers published on the Atlantic Coast, among which I especially refer to *La Información* (1917-1979). The archives of this publication came into the hands of CIDCA-Bluefields after hurricane Joan in October 1988.[5] Rescued editions of other newspapers, some published in English, such as *The American*, *El Diario Costeño*, and *The Bluefields Weekly*, were already with CIDCA (de Oro Solórzano 1991). The information contained in these resources, together with the use of the abovementioned research techniques, should be the basis for a new or complementary understanding of Atlantic Coastal history, to which, I hope, the following two chapters are a modest contribution.

Notes

1. From the music-cassette entitled "One destiny" (ENIGRAC 1988). The *Soul Vibrations*, a band from the Atlantic Coast (Bluefields) formed in 1986, promote their music as Afro-Nicaraguan, stressing the African roots of the creole people in the region. As the same time, their songs have a strong political message aimed to break-(rock)-down stereotypes that exist concerning Nicaraguan black culture.

2. See also an earlier article by Vilas entitled *Revolutionary change and multi-ethnic regions: the sandinista revolution and the Atlantic Coast* (1987: 61-100). In a section related to the reasons why the coastal population did not participate in the revolution of 1979, he even goes so far to state that "as a general proposition, it can be accepted that after the 1929 crisis, and above all after the very strong repression that followed the workers' strikes on the coast and the assassination of General Sandino in 1934, the coastal population disappeared as a *social force*, i.e., a social group capable of generating specific effects in the political and ideological realms of national society: the government, the political parties, the union movement, etc." (ibid: 69, his emphasis). Apart from the reductionist view on politics and ideology that the author airs, the use of the extremely generalistic concept of "the coastal population" can be questioned.

3. Some authors have made similar arguments. See, for example, Hale (1987: 33-57) in which he provides an analysis of the complexities of class and ethnic differentiation within coastal society.

4. Concerning the history of the Pacific region and related to general issues that have mainly been analyzed within the context of this geographical area, some studies that make use of these kind of research techniques exist. See, for example: *Hombre del Caribe* (Ramirez 1981), the vivid testimony of Abelardo Cuadra who describes the experiences and reflections on his life during which he, among others, participated in the civil war of 1926, fought against Sandino in the Segovias, was involved in the assassination of Sandino, and tried twice to assassinate Anastasio Somoza. Another example is the excellent collection and analysis of eight life-stories of *campesinas* by CIERA (1989).

5. During the three years of our stay in Bluefields, I helped with the reading and selection of articles that could provide a new and so far little known view on coastal history. I initiated this task rather as a curiosity, but soon became completely involved in it as one article after another revealed ideas, experiences, "projects," and critiques of different generations of *costeños*. In cooperation with CIDCA, I decided to edit a volume of these articles, ordered chronologically and introduced by a short account of the hows and whys of this undertaking. The working title of this volume is: *Para una mina de oro se necesita una mina de plata: fragmentos de la historia socio-económica de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua, 1910-1979*. We are looking for money to publish this book which, we hope, signifies an important contribution to the search for local sources and an alternative history of the Atlantic Coast.

6. "LOOKING FOR WORK": A COASTAL LABOUR HISTORY

> I am not a politician. I am not a revolutionary nor a contra-revolutionary. One night a guy reach my house and say to me "let's talk about this and that," but I tell him, "me, I just have one policy, that is working, going to the bush, cutting trees and getting my two-weekly payment."
> (**Santiago**, February 1989)

> I am looking all around and I am still living. I owe nobody yet! When I see the thing is so dear I gone to the bush, make a little business, bring some rice into the house. I stay three or four days and then I going back. Right now I have nothing to do yet. The situation is hard. I don't know how long this thing will go on.
> (ibid, September 1990)

In this chapter I will present excerpts from the labour history of Santiago Rivas, a well known tree expert in Bluefields, a man with a life-time of experience in the lumber sector, especially with the species of the tropical rainforest on the Atlantic Coast. Although the selection of this particular story no doubt has limitations, as has the use of any source of information, I believe that it reveals some important aspects of coastal history that so far have been unknown or underexposed. In other words, I judge Santiago to be a useful and reliable witness of certain events that have marked this history.[1] In the following paragraphs I will come back to these limitations, which include the fact that the narrative is that of a man of creole-mestizo origins, 62 years old, with a specific way of remembering things.

In the first place, the description and analysis of this labour history will show us the changes in Santiago's economic activity during the different stages of his life. It gives us an impression of how he looked for work in the forest and in other fields of economic enterprise at times when job opportunities in the lumber sector were scarce. It provides an insight into how Santiago has tried to solve basic problems of survival (of himself and his close kin), given his (accumulated) capacities, knowledge, and social and economic resources and taking into account the new opportunities that presented themselves.

At the same time, this story reveals the key social relations that have constituted these activities. Thus, we aim to identify the social ties that make up Santiago's "web" of livelihood and survival and through which he has developed economic activities and from which new relations resulted. We expect that these social relations have provided a minimum guarantee for support in times of insecurity which, as we have seen in previous chapters, has been and continues to be a fundamental characteristic of coastal society and history.

However, this particular and, in a way, unique labour story will also serve as a window on changes that have taken place in the coastal region at large and, occasionally, in other parts of the country. The excerpts will elucidate some of the social consequences of the fluctuating demands for labour, land (forest), capital, and infrastructure at the regional, national, and international levels. In this way, we will consider not only the "pull" forces set in motion by the giants of economic development, but also the "push" forces that motivated people to look for work.

We assume that these motivations were strongly influenced by the demands of enterprises as they offered a salary for a certain period of time. We would like to know, however, whether the move to a (new) job was not also inspired by other things, e.g., by what people left behind because they found it difficult: family life, life on a farm, in a village, in town (Bertaux-Wiame 1981: 253-254). My purpose is to place Santiago's labour history within the wider context of change and look at how personal events are dialectically connected with regional history.

Life-stories: coloured by culture, moulded by the present

A critical facet of life stories concerns the form in which they are reconstructed. The way in which they are told may reveal the cultural elements by which people define their own and the social roles of others. Bertaux-Wiame (1981: 256-257) has made a very interesting study of this idea. In her work on the movement of French migrants to Paris, she discovered important differences between the stories told by men and women. She found out that these differences were not only revealed through variations in the social logic that constituted their stories, but also through the form in which they told them.

Concerning the social logic, she observed that French men moved mainly through family networks to find work in the city, while women moved through job networks to find a family. With respect to form, she found that men presented their lives mainly as **their own**, i.e., a life in which they had been active subjects pursuing certain goals. Women, on the other hand, did not talk as much about what they had done and achieved, but **to whom they had been related**. Analyzing the accounts, this difference was made very clear: women told their stories using "us and we"; men used "me and I." I will refer in more detail to the relevance of these insights as Santiago's story unravels in the rest of this chapter.

Santiago's story is, in many ways, related to the present. The past is culturally reconstructed from the present point of view, which encompasses one's socio-economic situation, the degree of success or failure experienced in life, and the impact of changes in society at large (Leydesdorff 1987: 25-58). For instance, if people are enjoying relative prosperity, they might speak more easily about the harsh conditions at the beginning of their labour careers, because they believe they have left this period far behind. Others, in less fortunate circumstances might be reluctant to remember the past, because it reflects too strongly their present-day unhappiness.

One of the recurrent characteristics of memories is that they are dressed with nostalgia and sentimentality about "the good old days." As I have pointed out, we frequently find this element in the writings on coastal history (Jenkins 1986: 206; Vilas 1990: 113; Sujo 1991: 33-34). Although my aim is not to discuss this question in detail, it does not suffice to simply observe this tendency as the cited authors do. People might refer to this image in an attempt to communicate their feelings through the limited means of language: feelings that are an essential element in the construction of meaning that people give to the place they occupy in the present. At the same time, their stories might be used, often unconsciously, to criticize the present state of affairs or views that tend to do away or forget about the past.

We should ask ourselves, therefore, how these reminiscences have come into existence often as a central feature of coastal history, culture, and ideology. Moreover, we might encounter views that depict the past as miserable and insecure and thus contradict dominant notions and memories. Hence, the collection of life stories is important in demystifying these stereotypical images or explanations that continue to be reproduced in studies.[2]

To complement the labour story of Santiago and provide another perspective, I will include a series of articles and portions of articles from the weekly "*La Información*." These articles, written by coastal journalists in the 1950s and 1960s, present additional information about certain elements of Santiago's career. They tell us, for example, about the activities of particular lumber and banana companies, the preoccupations of some important coastal entrepreneurs, and the modernization plans of the Somoza family. As such, these articles will also serve as a bridge to Chapter 7.

In some instances these articles reflect Santiago's narrative; sometimes, however, they throw new light on his perceptions. In all manners, they represent an additional coastal point of view, part of our search for stories that so far have been neglected. This, also, should be a way of reducing the limitations on the capacity of Santiago to remember things.

I collected the pieces of this labour history through a series of informal talks and formal interviews with Santiago, in which he did his best to reconstruct his past experiences. His story was thus reconstructed step by step, or layer by layer, as both Santiago and interviewer/researcher played a role.[3] By formal interview, I mean semistructured and recorded sessions in which I asked Santiago to give, so far as he was able, a detailed chronological account of the different jobs or economic activities that he undertook. During these interviews I tried to limit my interventions to a minimum in order not to disturb the course of his story.[4]

In retrospect, I can classify my remarks and questions into two main categories. One was to clarify when an event took place (month, year), as I discovered certain inconsistencies in Santiago's account. This was especially true for periods during which he was not in a stable employment situation, i.e., the more difficult times.

The other kind of question concerned the specific ways in which he had moved from one job to another and from one place to the next. Analyzing these "jumps" in time and space, I realized that there was a striking similarity to the pattern described by Bertaux-Wiame with regard to the differences in the forms of stories

related to her by French male and female migrants. It was at these critical points in his story that I realized that Santiago also told his story mainly in the "I and me" form. As the two quotations that open this chapter indicate, his story is very much the account of a self-made man. Sometimes, however, I wondered how he had been able to move back and forth, within and outside the Atlantic Coast looking for and finding new employment opportunities. I, therefore, asked him several times whether he had made the changes in occupation through specific contacts with friends or acquaintances — not without reason as we will see.

This brief analysis of how we made use of this research technique provides us with some relevant additional information about his life "in the bush" as he used to describe his experiences.

"Life in the bush"

Santiago, born in 1929 and currently 63 old, grew up as a little boy in the city of Bluefields. The child of a Nicaraguan, Spanish-speaking mother of mestizo origin and a English-speaking, creole father who had come from the Cayman Islands, he emphasized this double ethnic origin: "My mother, she an indian woman from Matagalpa and my father, he not either from here [the Atlantic Coast]. My father is from Cayman's. What I mean to say, two kinds of blood."

His father had come to Nicaragua in 1925 as a 17 year old musician and member of a popular music group. In 1938, when Santiago was nine, his father left their home in Bluefields to travel to the Cayman Islands, a trip from which he never returned. Santiago remembers that his mother, born in 1912 and a teacher in Bluefields, described his father as a kind of "*vago*" or vagabond, in short, a man who above all liked playing music, dancing, and drinking. Now Santiago lives in Bluefields, in the neighbourhood of "Pancasán," together with his wife Yolanda and three daughters aged three, eleven, and thirteen years. The oldest two daughters go to the San José college in Bluefields, one in fifth and one in sixth grade.

Santiago describes Yolanda, who was born in the town of Rama as "a Spanish woman, an indian," that is, from mestizo origin. She spends most of her time at home, taking care of the house and children. Her family (mother, three brothers, and one sister), with whom she maintains regular contact, live in the Siquia River area. Santiago does not have any close kin on the Atlantic Coast. His only half-brother from his mother's side, Ramon, left Nicaragua 45 years ago for Mexico and has never returned. His only sister, Rosita, died at the age of eleven years.

Santiago is a very friendly and intelligent person of such fragile physique that it is hard to believe he has worked most of his life in the harsh conditions of lumber camps located in the tropical rainforest. Maybe we can explain his strength by the fact that he does not drink or smoke, something he is very proud of. During one of the interviews he directed my attention to another aspect of his personality that he considered important. He told me that he had never had a fight in his life, "with nobody" and he had never been sent to jail. This tells us something about how he has dealt and continues to deal with people and situations.

I met Santiago for the first time in November 1988, a few weeks after hurricane Joan had raged over Nicaragua. At the time, I was representing CIDCA-Bluefields in a small group of regional experts who were making a first evaluation of the damage to the forest caused by Joan in the area around Bluefields (see Chapter 2). Along with three forest technicians of IRENA, whose director was in charge of the mission, Santiago also worked on this team. He was selected because of his vast experience and knowledge of the tropical rainforest in the Atlantic coastal region.

During our trips into the forest and along the rivers and creeks I had a chance to talk with him. These conversations were of an informal and non-structured character. We talked about our excursions in the fields and the dismal state of the flora and fauna. Only very occasionally were other subjects raised, such as his former visits to the area when he worked for lumber companies.

A few months later, in February 1989, we met once again as co-members of another evaluation team. This time our work involved a much broader based study of the damaged forest and the consequences for future restoration. Santiago, having been involved in the first evaluation, was contracted as one of two experienced tree spotters who played an important role in this multinational effort to assess the destruction caused by Joan.

During the two weeks of this second study, Santiago told me in more detail about his "life in the bush," making reference to his experiences in mahogany camps during the 1950s and 1960s, his years on banana plantations and a cotton hacienda during the 1970s, his trip to Costa Rica just before the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, and his various jobs after 1979. In spite of the fragmented nature of our talks, my interest was raised because his vivid and often surprising account provided an inside view of historical changes in the region that I had not found so far in articles and books available at CIDCA's library.

At the end of the evaluation, Santiago agreed to a series of interviews in quieter surroundings without the disturbance of mosquitos circling around us. Hence, the idea of working out a labour history based on Santiago's experiences was born. In the two and half years that followed, we elaborated this idea, searching step by step for the pieces of a puzzle. While doing so, we became good friends.

In the following pages, Santiago tells us about his labour activities and experiences, beginning with his first job in the "bush" as a boy of 12. Left alone after the death of his mother, his father having returned to the Cayman Islands, Santiago was brought up by an uncle who took him to the forest. This uncle, a local lumber contractor, liked to work in the camps of the big companies, and this determined Santiago's immediate future. As I mentioned before, his half-brother left at the same time for Mexico. I did not inquire about the reasons for this decision.

Mahogany camp

Santiago started his working career during the second world war (1939-1945). As we will see in more detail in Chapter 7, during this era the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua was suffering a prolonged economic crisis that had its origins in the stock

market crash in New York in 1929, the beginning of the great depression that would affect economic activities worldwide.

On the Atlantic Coast the situation was critical: from 1929 on, the production of bananas dropped dramatically. In 1943, the country exported no bananas. Subsistence agriculture was rather insignificant due, to a large extent, to the tradition of importing food. At the same time, commerce and import and export, in general, stagnated at very low levels caused by the withdrawal of ships for military purposes.

> **Movement of lumber in the department**
> One observes enthusiasm and movement in Bluefields due to the coming transports of lumber to the United States shipped by the two companies that operate in this sector. Tomorrow the crew will load the ship of the company whose representative is Mr Johnny Williams and next Tuesday, the 23rd of this month, another group of workers will load the Norwegian steamer "Lillemor" of the I.T. Williams & Sons Lumber Company. This is the most powerful company of North America, founded in 1863 and whose agent in this city is the dynamic *costeño* Walter G. Tom. As we have heard, this ship will carry 500,000 feet of mahogany to the American markets. The lumber expert Mr Jorge Jureidini, who also works for this company, left Tuesday, the 16th, for Pearl Lagoon to measure the lumber that the "Lillemor" will transport. All this lumber is owned by Mr John Wright who has given a great impulse to business in this Department.
> (*La Información*, 18 September 1941; my translation)

The only economic activities that were hit less hard by the crisis were the extraction of lumber and rubber, both strategic products for the war machinery set in motion by the United States government (see the article, above). The production of rubber attained a relative importance; after Brazil, Nicaragua became the second largest exporter on the continent. However, the rubber boom was of only short duration (1942-1944) and was largely controlled by US companies. However, the lumber and rubber companies provided work for a number of local contractors, subcontractors, tree spotters and cutters, rubber tappers, and men working in the harbours of El Bluff and Bluefields.

> When I start working in the forest when I was young, well, it was the same business, mahogany. I started working in a mahogany camp from 12 years old. When I was 11 years my mother died and I had no family here. And then I went to the bush with my uncle and I start working, just cutting mahogany. That was in Kuringwas, Río Siquia, Río Kama, Río Mahogany, and Río Grande. My uncle, him was a contractor man the same as how CORFOP is working now. Making contract, marking trees, cutting trees, making *carriles* [lanes in the forest] and then hauling the trees to the river.
>
> We were cutting the trees and in that time no motorsaw, everything with axe. We had to carry machete and make *carriles* like that and the logs went rolling with what we call "kenhook," like a fishing hook. It was like a stick with a hook on top; with that we pull the logs to the water, to the

> river. If the river is small, what you have to do is working dry weather. When raining time is coming you driving down to the deep water. You make a boom, you put all these logs together according to the amount you can cut. Then you put wire and carry it to the boat and haul it. That is the way we used to work the first time.
>
> That time they pay in cordobas and when I start working they pay by the day and sometimes you work with a contract. When I start working as a boy I was paid by the day. That time you used to get two cordobas, making *carril*, falling the wood and *marina*, that mean bringing the provision up and down in a dory — all the life in a different way — calling *marinero*, two cordobas a day.
>
> The first time I used to work in Kuringwas River working with Tomas Ocampo. There were several people working in that place with contract, Tomas Ocampo, Marcelino Sequeira, Victor Bravo, Monica Largaespada, Ernesto Largaespada. Well, that time the first time I start working in camp, I never work with contract, just working with them people and working by the day.

Santiago is mentioning the names of all the contractors with whom he ever worked. Tomas Ocampo (father and son) and Monica Largaespada are mentioned in a study by CIDCA (1989) as important local lumber contractors who operated from 1945 on with Weis-Fricker and another company named CAMCO (Central American Mahogany Company). They worked in three camps along the Kuringwas River, El Lanchon, El Boom, and San Juan.

About 300 workers were employed in these camps, mainly mestizo migrants from the Chontales, Boaco, and Matagalpa departments. These contractors received part of their payment in advance to organize a crew of men to cut and extract trees. They also used to get tools from the companies. They were also involved in the distribution of food, clothing, and other basic items to the labour force through the companies' *comisariatos* (ibid: 177-178). Victor Bravo, a migrant from Chontales and Marcelino Sequiera, a coastal farmer, were contractors who later, during the 1960s and 1970s, worked with Cuban lumber entrepreneurs such as Vicente Mira, José Luis Gonzalez, and Pedro Hernandez (ibid: 178).

Santiago mentioned that these two contractors sold lumber to a company called MADINSA; and later to another company which he remember as "PIPSA" (he was not sure about this name) that was supposed to be owned by a Canadian. Probably he meant an enterprise called "McPee-Forestal." I have not been able to find additional information about this company. MADINSA was indeed a company owned by Cubans. What is important about all this, however, is the crucial role of these contractors, coastal and non-coastal, who established the links with the managers of the companies and the workers in the "bush." Moreover, some of them maintained contacts with people working for or related to the Somoza family and the National Guard.

> In that time, the companies, the first big companies came to Nicaragua, calling... Weis-Fricker. That is the first time they gone to Kuringwas side. They went on the road right across to Matagalpa. They work in this

> Kuringwas side first. When they had done all this side, they cross all the road to Matagalpa. In two years they construct that road that goes all the way down to Santo Domingo, Chontales. My truck driver, one Spanish fellow called Gustavo Matamoros used to work on that road. This company was a different thing, them having trucks and tractors. They had one office right here in Bluefields, when you go down to the market on the corner, one concrete building. I work with Weis-Fricker for about one year and a half.

Weis-Fricker was certainly not the first company to operate on the coast, but for Santiago the enterprise represented his first encounter with a big and, for those days, relatively modern company. The trucks and tractors clearly impressed him. In 1951, the Weis-Fricker company fired most of its workers along the Kuringwas River, as the company was waiting for the next dry season to extract lumber (*La Información*, 30 July 1951).

This cyclical character of operations has been and continues to be a central feature of the lumber industry on the coast. The following article gives us more information about the company. It also draws our attention to the fact that the presence of Weis-Fricker was not completely uncontested as some people (we do not know who they were) protested against the company's hiring of non-coastal workers for jobs they considered appropriate for coastal or Nicaraguan men and women.

> **THE WEIS-FRICKER EXPORT AND IMPORT CORPORATION HAS MADE BIG INVESTMENTS ON THE ATLANTIC COAST**
>
> **Fifteen years on the Coast**
> About fifteen years ago the Weis-Fricker Mahogany Company, as it was originally named, came to the coast to start lumber operations. The first manager of the company was Mr Johnny Williams, the in this region well-known lumber expert. Mr Williams renounced from his job in April of this year and left for the USA on another mission related to the same company.
>
> **New organization**
> As is known in our city, at the beginning of this year the company made all the necessary arrangements for a full-time establishment and major scale of operations on the coast; this time with the new name of Weis-Fricker Export & Import Corporation. For this goal it moved all its motorized equipment, offices, and other material of its enterprise from Belize, where the company was operating, to Nicaragua. For the development of its work, the company has used large numbers of labourers, of national and foreign origins. Inquiring about the objection that has been made in the city with regards to the amount of foreign workers, they have told us that this was due to the lack of well-prepared persons in the region. The good office workers were already employed and probably many outside the area. They explained that they hired foreign drivers and mechanics because of technical reasons and experience to drive many of the vehicles. The company possesses strong diesel trucks that are equipped with many switches and

manometers that indicate different changes about which an inexperienced driver could become confused in a few minutes. And many of these trucks cost $17,000. However, they also told us that later on the experienced drivers will be matched with Nicaraguan ones so that the latter obtain experience and will become trained for their handling.

Kuringwas and the Grande River

When the company started its work on a large-scale, it established camps in Kuringwas and the Grande River. To these sites it brought all its tools and machinery that came from Belize. In both places efforts to cut mahogany trees were initiated with determination. Of the two places it turned out that the Grande River could not be exploited due to the location of the trees at the centre of the mountains. Therefore, and because the rainy season had started, the company was forced to close temporarily its operations in this sector. For the moment it is exploring ways to localize the trees.

In Kuringwas work was more productive. A road of 37 miles was constructed to facilitate the transport of lumber from the centres to the river where trunks are piled together and tugs transport them to sea for embarkment. Here the company has a complete set of tractors, trucks and a mechanic workshop. It has heavy trucks that can carry 50,000 feet of lumber at once. There are 15 trucks and 30 tractors. The value of all its equipment is estimated at one million dollars.

Investments of the company

Based on information that very generously has been given to us by Mr Weis and Mr Glaser, we can confirm that the company has invested a large capital that has helped significantly to improve the economic situation of Bluefields and its sites of operations. In the Grande River area it invested sixty to seventy thousand dollars. In Kuringwas the amount has reached so far $100,000.

After only one month of work, Mr Glaser, head of the Imports Department, payed 160,000 cordobas in salaries to workers and drivers in the latter district. The acceleration of operations motivated many extra working hours and some labourers even worked 24 hours a day.

The export of lumber so far did not cover all the costs; it would hardly be enough for one third of expenses. However, the entrepreneurs consider that this first year has been first of all for preparation and organization. They expect that subsequent exports will bring profits.
(*La Información*, 25 June 1949; my translation)

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That time... I am 62 years now; I was about 15 years old that mean to say 1944. That time the salaries were small. Yeah, that time the best salary was five cordobas a day, but five cordobas that time plenty money. Because one pants like this [pointing to his working trousers] was six, seven, nine cordobas. You make 30 cordobas a week; 120 a month. Because one pound of sugar cost 10 cents; one drink, 10 cents; one pack of cigarettes, 25 cents, like that, one plate of food 50 or 75 cents.

> All that time we live in the bush, because that time not like this time. That time is a different thing, that time you go to the bush and they pay you every four or six months, sometimes one year. Why they doin' that? Because in the bush they keep everything: clothes, medicines, provision, machetes, axes. What I mean to say, you don't need to go to town, because they got everything in the camp. Sometimes we go to the bush all six, seven, eight months until one year in one time. Not like this time, every *quincena* [fixed period of 15 days], every last day of the month you got payment. That time working stiff, eight hours a day!
>
> There was a big *comisariato* and you can buy everything! When you need something... Let's say you are the boss, then I come and I need something, for example, working shoes. So I make a list and go to the *comisariato*. When the time come they make the *liquidación*, cut of [from your salary] what you have got then.

Jorge Jureidini

Except in the rubber and lumber sectors, the years of the second world war were difficult for most coastal people, as the economic crisis of the 1930s became worse and worse. After the war, the situation on the Atlantic Coast remained problematic. Although banana production improved considerably, it never again reached pre-war levels, while agriculture maintained very much at a subsistence level.

However, some local entrepreneurs, "big businessmen" in the words of Santiago, who before the war had been involved in the banana and lumber trade, provided an important stimulus to the revival of commercial activities. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, these men and their families, descendants of immigrants, managed to establish close relations with both foreign companies and regional authorities, which helped them to continue their economic enterprises. Their work ethic, to which the next article in *La Información* refers, was one of the factors driving their efforts.

So far, the role of these coastal families has not been analyzed in detail, but from various sources of information we can conclude that they played an important role in economic and social/cultural activities in the region during the 40s, 50s, and 60s. In their continuous search for new commercial opportunities at regional and supra-regional levels, they stimulated the demand for labour and infrastructure while bringing and keeping in circulation considerable amounts of cash. Santiago gives us an account of his experiences with these coastal companies.

> From that time on I started working, working and growing a little bit. I started working farm, making farm in Siquia River. Planting corn, planting bananas, cassava, raising pigs. I working alone because my uncle he was dead. I work that place for 12 years, I can't remember. I started working banana farm on Siquia River and making contract right here in Bluefields with one Jurien, mister Jurien [Jorge Jureidini] and one China-creole man called mister Walter Tom.
>
> The real big boss was Jorge Jurien. Him was *turco*, *arabe*. He was business man. I don't know which company he was belonging, but him was

> the big boss. He got mahogany business, banana business. And there was a next big businessman, called Walter Tom, he belong to this Bluefields. And after that Weis-Fricker, but this company closed down all their work. They close down and the banana companies come. They start with the banana company, Mister Jurien and Walter Tom. They got all kinds of boats. Them buying in Siquia River, Grande River and selling bananas in the Bluff and they ship them to the States. They also selling lumber. They got all kind of boats. Siquia River, Río Grande, same here in El Bluff, bringing bananas to El Bluff and selling it to the American companies. Selling the bananas and selling the lumber. I carry the bananas on a mule to the riverside and then carry them in a dory to the boat. That time selling nine hand-one bunch of bananas for three cordobas.
>
> Then I got a contract with him [Jureidini] for 15,000 feet [of lumber]. That time they pay for one thousand feet, 350 cordobas, bringing it here at the sawmill in Bluefields [owned by Jureidini]. I remember gone to one chap we calling *Hermanos* [brothers] Bond, right here in Bluefields. I came to him for provision; two quintals of flour, beans, rice, cigarettes, tobacco, clothes, and all kind of things and one "twenty-two" [a gun]. All that provision, how much that cost me? 1250 cordobas, that big amount of money! I still have a paper at home, old, old, old, I hardly can see the number. And look now, how much one quintal of beans costs, one quintal of rice: 600,000 cordobas. Look the difference!

Jorge Jureidini was an important entrepreneur, an immigrant of Algerian descent, who worked for lumber companies and on his own, as an exporter of bananas and lumber. Together with another coastal immigrant of Chinese descent, Walter Tom, he played a significant role in the 1950s when most foreign companies had left the region. From 1929 on, Jorge Jureidini had worked for the American Fruit Company as contractor, buying bananas from independent farmers. In 1949 he started his own enterprise, exporting bananas to the USA (New Orleans and Tampa). He owned two ships with a capacity of 180 tons and equipped with a refrigeration system to hold 8000 or 9000 bunches of bananas. He also had several boats and tugs (one was named *The Georgina*) to transport fruit and lumber from the rivers to the harbours of Bluefields and The Bluff. I will turn to the stories of these men and their companies in Chapter 7.

> **Men of action and with roots in the Atlantic Coast: two persons of the coastal lumber industry, misters John Wright and Jorge Jureidini**
> From the beginning of the world massacre in which the democratic nations became involved due to the force and savagery of the nazi hordes, the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua suffered from a tough economic clash. The banana industry was suppressed from one moment to the next due to lack of ships that carried the "green gold." The economy would have come to a complete disorder and intense misery were it not that the lumber industry expanded thanks to the efforts of Misters John Wright and Jorge Jureidini, both long-time residents of Bluefields and related to all social classes.
>
> Mr Wright is head of the strong WING SANG Company and personally he is a capitalist and industrial entrepreneur with a great tenacity in his

work. Mr Jureidini is a proper representative of labour who has accumulated his capital with lots of sweat. He is gifted with energy and dynamism. He has knowledge of the whole extension of the Atlantic Littoral and a lot of experience in work concerning lumber, including the cutting of trees and the embarkment on open sea. He is appreciated by the North-American export companies and recognized by the Nicaraguan government for his work.

With the support of Mr Wright and based on these antecedents, Mr Jureidini took the initiative to dedicate himself to the lumber industry. This kind of enterprise demanded that the initiative would be backed with capital, because it knows the natural risks to which it is exposed. They expected that with enough capital the enterprise would prosper. The request for wood concessions received a direct and positive answer from the government imposing not one single restriction, only the fulfilment of the law. From the start until today the money handed out to subcontractors has been regular and enough, despite the large amounts of money that go around in this business which could easily lead to very significant losses. And this year more than any other has brought a bad winter with the result that all the work of one year has remained behind in the heart of the mountains. These lumber operations have made money flowing abundantly, from which subcontractors and workers in general have benefitted. But they have also been in favour of the democratic nations, because lumber is actually a highly demanded product for the war industry. At the same they mean economic support for Bluefields where Wright and Jureidini are operating. Although far from the battlefields of the war, this cooperation will contribute to the victory.

Moreover, given the local need of an efficient saw-mill, they have installed all the necessary equipment in the vicinity of the city with access by road and water. Boards, beams, and planks of every size are produced at this plant for the internal and external markets of the American Continent. And demands ask for a maximum production.

In this way, Misters Wright and Jureidini contribute another percentage to the coastal economy and another degree to the democratic cause. Foreigners of this quality are what we need on the Atlantic Coast. Persons who are friendly to everybody, easy going, hard working and each day of better aptitudes.

(*La Información*, 24 December 1944; my translation)

"*Tired of working bananas and gone to Kukra Hill*"

At the end of the 1950s, the companies of Walter Tom and Jorge Jureidini suffered a series of financial losses due to technical problems (banana diseases) and an increasingly competitive market. Farmers were affected by this new "bust" period in the banana sector. It motivated Santiago to look for a new job.

> And so I would grow up like that while little kind of work and from that moment I tired and sell the farm to look for next kind of work.

> Then I coming down, come back to Bluefields and start working again in camp with NIPCO [the Nicaraguan Long Leaf Pine Lumber Company]. That was in Puerto Cabezas, because NIPCO working in Puerto Cabezas. There was a next company working here in Bluefields, this ehh..., I don't remember... them was Cuban people. Them *gerente* was... there was two of them, one was called Luis [this should be José Luis González, mentioned in the CIDCA study] and the next one I forgot the name, one tall fellow, I don't know if he is working in Ocotal right now [here he probably refers to Pedro Hernández or Vicente Mira]. I work with them people, cutting cedro macho, mahogany, and ceibo, all of that first class lumber. Not for contract, I just work for them. Then I gone to this Kukra Hill.

This was in 1958. The idea to go to Kukra Hill was initiated by Nicolas, a friend who asked Santiago what he was doing alone in the bush and why he did not want to come with him, because in Kukra Hill there was "plenty money." They both went to Kukra Hill, Santiago for some time, Nicolas still there, running a farm that he bought after having worked some years in the area.

As I will deal with in more detail in Chapter 7, after the second world war, began what could be called the "modernization" of the Atlantic Coast. Influenced by ideas developed at the international level, the Somoza government initiated a series of programs and projects oriented toward the physical and cultural integration of the coast. The main objective of those programs and projects was to create a new basis for the accumulation of capital, this time directed by state institutions controlled by the Somoza family.

Plans for various large-scale capitalist initiatives reached Bluefields. One of these projects, the establishment of a sugarcane factory in Kukra Hill was completed in 1966. Sugarcane was introduced in the area from the Pacific and planted on the land of the hacienda "Tierra Dorada." This hacienda belonged originally to the United Fruit Company and was later administered by the Cukra Development Company. In 1958 it passed into the hands of the Blue Brothers, Hamm, Smith and Company Limited. This US company used the hacienda land for the production of bananas, nutmeg, and cacao which were first planted in 1958 on a 2400-acre extension. However, in 1959, the banana plantation was ruined by Panama disease (Soria et al. 1961: 5-6).

After this failure, the hacienda was taken over by the National Bank of Nicaragua and an attempt was made to revive the fruit business by introducing new varieties ("Giant Cavendish" and "Roy Kerr") that would resist Panama disease. Due to poor management, this was a failure.

Luis Somoza became interested in the hacienda and decided to take over the whole enterprise. Instead of trying again to plant bananas, he introduced sugarcane. Despite the unfavourable ecological conditions for this crop, the establishment of the mill attracted large numbers of labourers from all over the country. A new road was opened up for the transport of both people and products. Interested in what was going on in Kukra Hill and given the crisis in the banana and lumber sectors, Santiago followed the initiative of his friend to look for other employment and decided to go to Kukra Hill joining the growing labour force in this area.

That was when Somoza time... Because the first time that they came up to Nicaragua to Kukra Hill and grow banana plant, that was called Neil Blue. The first company that came to Kukra Hill, that came in charge, that was Neil Blue brothers. Because the Bank take the place first and then the Bank gave it to Neil Blue Company. Neil Blue gone and then Somoza take the farm. Them were two young fellows from the United States. The first American man that taking charge of that place. Though the *gerente*, *capataces*, and *mandadores* them was Nicaraguan people. The company got everything, houses for the men, a kitchen, a big sleeping place. There was 600 or 700 men working in that place, all kind of people, creole, indian, miskito. They had their own aviation field and a hospital.

Bananas, pure bananas everywhere, and *nuez moscada* [nutmeg] and shackle. How do you say? Cacao. That is a tree high like that [points to the ceiling of the house]. I worked for that company for one and a half year. But afterwards, when the banana starts with sprouts and shoot, one *quema* come up, one sickness we call "Sigatoka," that burned everything. The shackle too. And then the American got bagsed or something, *desconsolado* [disappointed], and the Bank of Nicaragua taking care of that place and buying from Neil Blue and the Bank taking charge of everything.

And the Bank start cultivating one fruit calling mangostien [also known as mangostan, one fruit like mango, small little one. They put mangostien and came up with the shackle again, but it never came up good though. The Bank never did any good in that place. Then when Somoza went, he said, "Nobody can handle this, and I want to take charge of this place." And Somoza he got the power and the money and he put the tractors and bugged them all those trees and dig it up and decided to put sugarcane. In the sugar-time I worked five months. That was paid by task, one task being two tons. The salary was 8.40 cordobas for one task and the food free. Cutting cane is heavy work, you get up at four or five in the morning and work until two or three in the evening. The sun is very hot, so the earlier you get up the better.

And Somoza cut all the bananas and put sugarcane. And from that time they never changed anything only with that cane [from 1961 the installation of the mill started]. And then Somoza stay for years and years until these Sandinistas come and take care of the place [in 1979].

THE INSTALLATION OF A SUGAR-REFINERY IN BLUEFIELDS IS A FACT

10,000 tons of sugarcane from the interior will arrive for planting; it looks like that soon there will be a shortage of workers for the company in this region

The news that soon a sugar factory will be installed in the Atlantic Coast has been confirmed by reliable persons. There were already rumours going around about these operations, but only recently we got the confirmation of it. This new sugar refinery will be installed here by the Somoza family, but so far the decision where the machinery, ovens and other parts of the factory will be placed, has not been taken yet. However, we know that it will

be within the parameters of the Kukra Hill and Kama River areas where the sites are abundant for this kind of operation thanks to good fluvial exits into all directions.

Engineer Luis Somoza D., the most important person involved in this project, stayed for more than one week at his hacienda Loma Mico. He was accompanied by other experts who came to inspect the soils for the planting of cane which they qualified as excellent. They also controlled the site for the installation of the refinery which they estimated in similar ways. ...

We hope that with this new sugar industry and the other seven companies that are operating in this sector of the Atlantic Coast, the economy of Bluefields will notably improve. There might even be a shortage of workers to realise the great works of which we are catching a glimpse. Companies that actually operate in Bluefields are the following: Bluefields Manufacturing Company, Tropical Sawmill, Sawmill The Pine-Field, Joe Watson, Sweetland Sawmill, and the fishing enterprises BOOTH S.A. and PESCANICA, S.A....

(*La Información*, 20 August 1964; my translation)

It would not be before 1966 that the first sugarcane harvest was realized, as the following article published in February of the same year indicates.

THE HARVEST IN KUKRA HILL STARTS THE 22nd
hundreds of workers will be employed, says Mr Luis Somoza; General Somoza and other industrials interested in a slaughter-house and an oyster nursery

Last saturday, on his way to "Tierra Dorada," Kukra Hill, on which fertile soils the well equipped sugar refinery FANSA is situated, the distinguished politician, rich Nicaraguan industrial entrepreneur and ex-president of the republic, senator don Luis A. Somoza D. visited Bluefields. According to don Luis, the first harvest of cane will begin the 22nd and the inauguration of the refinery will take place on the 25th of this month. He told one of our editors that they will employ hundreds of workers who will be supervised by sugarcane experts since this is the first time that these kind of tasks are being realised. While he stayed in this city at the residence of Colonel don Luis Ocon and lady, the young but experienced politician was visited by numerous friends. ... We were also informed that tuesday General Anastasio Somoza D. arrived at the harbour of El Bluff, in the presence of some well-off industrialist. We were told that they plan to realise the installation of a model-slaughterhouse in El Bluff and a nursery of oysters in Pearl Lagoon. We send our greetings to both personalities of Nicaraguan society.

(*La Información*, 12 February 1966; my translation)

Pacific side and "rough weather"

From 1960 to 1968, Santiago did not work for any one company. Instead he earned a living doing all sorts of small jobs, as a "*vago*" or vagabond as he called it. During these years, he lived most of the time in Bluefields.

> Then I left Neil Blue Company and I gone work *chiclero*, in Karawala, Río Grande, cutting chicle [from a tree that gives the basic material for chewing gum].[5] I only work for one Arab called Moises Dipp, right here in Bluefields. I work with him about one year.
>
> Then from Karawala I went to this Pacific side and place in Chinandega. I never like the work of *chiclero*, that is why I leave that work and gone to Chinandega. I gone working banana again, that's the Standard Fruit Company. I had plenty friends there, but all of them dead already. I went to Chinandega, that was 1969. I work four and a half years then I came back to the coast. Then I am going up and down. That time the weather is coming rough, you know. The Sandinistas and all this and that.... Then the companies start to run and nobody want to work in the companies again, because plenty of pure fight that Sandinista time. And I am afraid and I come here to the coast again. I stop right here when the Sandinista win, that was in 1979. Yes, in 1979 I came back here to Bluefields.

This was one of the times when I had to insist on asking how Santiago had decided to go to Chinandega. Once more, it was through a friend that he heard about the job opportunities at the Standard Fruit Company, which had turned its attention to the Pacific region for growing "green gold." During the 1970s, Standard was the only banana company that operated in the country, controlling all exports. In 1978, it had 2380 ha of fruit under cultivation on lands that the company rented from private owners. Total production mounted to more than six million boxes (Lopez 1986: 46). In the same year, the enterprise employed about 3000 workers. In 1982, the Standard Fruit Company abandoned Nicaragua and the FSLN nationalized both production and commercialization of the fruit.

> Four years and a half, picking bananas, all kinds of work. Cutting bananas, hauling bananas, and trailing them to the *batería* [packing plant], cutting of the leaves, that's what they calling *saneamiento* [sanitation].
>
> When you pick up fruit, they pay you by fruit. That time they used to pay 25 cents a fruit and when you work in *saneamiento*, they pay you by acre. In that time, they pay... I am not sure... 4.25 or 4.55 cordobas an acre. One man, a good working man used to this work, can do three or four acres a day. That depends on the capacity. And when the fruits starts to grow, they got this kind of work, calling *apoyo reembolso*. When the fruit grow up one side they put this one stick to support the tree and put one plastic to protect the fruit. The three big banana farms, "Cardón," "San Antonio," "Ulare," I worked four years and a half.

After two years of working for the Standard Fruit Company, Santiago was offered a post as supervisor of an area of 160 acres where new banana trees would be planted. According to Santiago, this was because the boss had confidence in him. The work on the 160 acres included designing the planting pattern, digging holes for planting the trees, planting, controlling the application of fertilizers, and installing the system of wires that transported the bananas ready for export. Apart from these tasks, Santiago was also asked to make trips to Honduras and

Guatemala to sell bananas and, on the return trip, to bring contraband — a regular practice, according to him. Because of these trips he knows the road from Chinandega to the town of La Unión in Guatemala quite well (he drew me a map of it during one of our interviews).

> I work with three *gerentes* [managers], all of them Nicaraguan people, but the real big boss was one young American fellow, I forget his name. Then a new *gerente* came, Eddy Moreira and things changed. He never agreed with me, he put his brother in charge of the place and then I gone.
>
> The same week I gone together with some friends to this place called... big farm, called "Puntañata." That is Pacific Coast, they call it Manisa too. Looking Potosí side and then one road looking *Pacífico*. There I worked for five months, during the dry season, cutting cotton. Then I run and gone to Costa Rica.

Santiago's memories of the everyday life in the Pacific region are still vivid. The heat of Chinandega was a constant nuisance and was the main cause of a fever and a cold he contracted during the first three months of his stay in the area (according to a local doctor this was due to the change in climate from the Atlantic to the Pacific region).

He remembers the "rain clouds" that used to pass over the banana plantations. Although everybody believed that they really contained rain, it turned out to be sand, due to erosion problems, caused by deforestation in the area. The heat was even worse on the "Puntañata" farm where the water from the wells was as hot as the coffee that we served Santiago when he came to talk with us at our house in Bluefields. The only solution was to buy ice to stay cool. The nights he spent outside, sleeping in his hammock slung between two orange trees, a habit he shared with other *costeños* who worked for the Standard Fruit Company and on the cotton hacienda.

"*Run and gone to Costa Rica*"

In 1975 Santiago left for Costa Rica, to return to Nicaragua only ten days before the overthrow of Somoza by the Sandinists on 19 July 1979.

> I work with one man named Nano Lorilloz, they call him Nano, his real name was Fernando. He had a big cattle farm. This man give me a good contract and that time a good salary was fifty or sixty colonos a day.
>
> I went to this San Carlos [on the San Juan River] and then I got into Los Chiles and I met a friend who said "this place is too cheap, let's go to San Carlos"... to this place calling... San Carlos in Costa Rica, the place they call it... Ciudad Quezada. I find a hotel there and stay about six days. The friend who was gone with me, he gone to the next place and leave me alone.
>
> One day, at about 7 o'clock in the morning I got up and I gone to the market to look coffee or something. And I find a little man, with one radio, a money man. And the man stand up and see me and he say, "You is Nica?" And he say, "You looking work?" And I say, "Yes, I looking work." And this

man say, "You work machete already?" I say, "Yes, that is my work." He say, "You wanna work with me?" I ask him, "Which part?" He say, "A place called El Toro." That is Tortuguero side, in the Atlantic part. He say, "We have all kind of work. I am the *mandador*." What I mean, the guy have the authority to look for people. He say, "Can you drive a truck?" I say, "I can drive a truck." He say, "Do you need money?" I say, "No." By that time I still keep 2000 or 3000 cordobas that I bring with me. I tell him, "No." So he says, "Come tomorrow with me," and I say, "Okay." So me I gone to the farm.

I stay on the farm. That farm is a big farm, about 60 men and 16 houses, big *potreros* [pasture land]. He had 13 farms. A big man. San Fernando, La Tortuga, El Toro, Tortuguero, all kind of farm. That man was millionaire, he got sawmill too. I stay that place four and a half years [from 1975 until 1979]. Then I come back to Nicaragua.

Back to Nicaragua

When I come back I start working here. I start working a little contract in Pearl Lagoon; take a permission from a creole fellow, at the Sindico [the office of the local military post] of Tasbapounie, Laguna de Perlas, and I gone to one place called Ibo Lagoon. I cut 120 logs of "Santa maria" and "Cedro macho" and when I gone to Pearl Lagoon to carry the logs, the Sandinistas caught me and they never give me the permit to carry the logs to Bluefields. They say, "You can't bring these logs." So I haul up these logs right there and see what to do. I make about ten trips up there [to Pearl Lagoon]. Then the logs sank down in the water. At the same time one man from Pearl Lagoon, who was gonna help me selling the lumber in Managua and fixing all the paper business, him he died from one sickness. I lose everything because nobody would help me. What was my own money I bring from Costa Rica. I lose everything then.

Then I say, "What to do?" I went to one place called Malopí and get me a little farm there and start to live there. You know Malopí? The big Malopí, then there is a creek Malopí and a place called San José. Right there I got a little farm. I have to look something to live.

Once again, I had to interrupt and ask Santiago how he was able to make this move.

That little farm he gave, he never sell it. Him is Pedro Gutierrez. He say, "You go to work, because I am too old to stay in the bush." Him a friend of mine, him is from Bluefields. He lives here a long time. He is old already, more old than me. He lives in "Santa Rosa" [one of the neighbourhoods of Bluefields]. Then I leave the farm and come to Bluefields. That was in 1982. I never like it. The first thing, because the place is never my own place, it is of somebody else. And that can't give me help because later on I might lose and I gonna get in trouble and before I get in trouble, better leave the thing and look something else to do. I come to Bluefields and I buy a house right here in Pancasán. From that time I start working CORFOP-COMABLUSA company.

Bluefields: working for CORFOP-COMABLUSA

> Well, then the Sandinistas got this place and this company start to work [COMABLUSA].
>
> The first *gerente* coming up in COMABLUSA calling Salaverry, one old man, I forgot the name, I think it is Salaverry. When Salaverry gone, Jimmy Webster come. Okay. From that time Jimmy Webster, all the time I work for that company. Jimmy Webster gone, and then come José Dixon. I work with José Dixon. Then, José Dixon gone and Jimmy Webster come back again. I stay work in the company. When Jimmy Webster gone again, the next *gerente* come calling Dickie Hooker. I work with Dickie Hooker too.
>
> When the hurricane come [Joan in October 1988], I cut down, I left the company [their sawmill and other equipment in Bluefields were badly damaged]. Now [this is 1990] the next *gerente* come and I wanna see if I work with them, captain Zepeda. At that time the bookkeeper is Jorge Berger. I know him a long time. When I work for COMABLUSA him was the bookkeeper of the company. They know me from long time so any time I ask for work, they give me work.
>
> The first time they work with tractor, truck, calling that today on Musilayna side [in 1982]. They working with trucks, haul up the logs in the bush and then from the bush to the sawmill in Bluefields. That time I working inspector. Inspector they call that go into the bush, check the places, check up the trees, check up the work, how they are doing, if it gone good or bad, calculate the amount of expenses, calculate the amount of feet of lumber that come by the day. That time, me working the only inspector.
>
> When Dixon come up, he take me out of inspector and give me one tractor. Because he say, "I want you to work on the tractor. Because I want a man who handle the tractor with care." So, okay. I have my contract in the house. Well, I am working tractor about one year and a half. Still in the same place. That time we cutting all kind of trees: Santa maria, Cedro macho, Aceituno, Gavilán, Laurel, Pansubá, Zapote, Ojocho colorado. That time, plenty of wood.

During our conversations about COMABLUSA, Santiago displayed a critical attitude toward the operations of the company. His criticisms were frequently directed against CORFOP, the parastatal institution in charge of the forest sector, although in practice he meant COMABLUSA, pointing out its bad management, the lack of initiatives at regional level, and the constant problem of shortage of equipment and vital resources such as gasoline, oil, and spare parts for the heavy machinery. Related to the management of the company, not only was the coming and going of directors a major problem, according to Santiago (and other contractors with whom I spoke), but the company also made promises that were never fulfilled by the directors.

Although he did not speak about it much, during the years he worked for COMABLUSA, Santiago had to deal on two occasions with groups of Contras. Fortunately, he survived these encounters.

COMABLUSA

From 1982 to 1990, COMABLUSA was the only lumber company operating in the Bluefields region. Only after the change of government, did new companies appear on the scene obtaining concessions from IRENA. In this section I briefly analyze the impact of this company concerning the demand for labour, the forest, and infrastructure.

If we look at the operations of COMABLUSA from its early days when it started extracting lumber in the area southwest of Bluefields, its major impact has been in the use of forest areas and the construction of access "roads" to facilitate transport of logs to the sawmill in Bluefields. The trees were cut on so-called "national lands," state-owned parcels, and only a small number of trees were cut on private lands. Despite the relatively small amount of lumber coming from private *fincas*, this activity caused important problems between the company, IRENA, and the regional government, on one side, and the owners of these *fincas* on the other side (CIDCA 1989). The same problem occurred a few weeks after the hurricane when the company started extracting trees from private lands without paying the owners for the lumber carried away.

For seven years, COMABLUSA had camps in the area southwest of Bluefields, at Musilayna Creek and close to Las Pavas Creek. From there it opened up secondary "roads" and paths to establish a connection with the existing section of road from Bluefields to Nueva Guinea (15 km long; for details, see Chapter 7). Because of the problems mentioned earlier, that were of a more or less structural character, the company never functioned at full capacity, thus limiting its demand for labour. In July 1984, COMABLUSA employed about 100 labourers in administration, transport, and the cutting and processing of trees and lumber (Yih 1984). By 1986, this number had been reduced to 60 (Lacayo 1989). Since 1982, COMABLUSA has never managed to satisfy the regional demand for lumber despite its regional monopoly until 1990.

Given the characteristics described above, in addition to the problems caused by the Contra war and hurricane Joan, we can conclude that the impact of the company on land, labour, and infrastructure and its link with the wider regional economy have been limited. The company has never operated as a centre of regional economic development, despite its relatively large-scale operations, which contrast with the other economic activities in the area around Bluefields. The problematic labour relations between Santiago and COMABLUSA illustrate clearly the unstable and problematic nature of the entrepreneurial activities of COMABLUSA.

After the hurricane: "a little business to pass my life"

Hurricane Joan struck Yolanda, Santiago, and their children as hard as it hit everyone else in the area, although they were lucky that their house did not blow away completely. However, Santiago had no job. And the prospective for re-establishment of COMABLUSA's activities in the short term were poor, because

of the enormous amount of damage done to both the forest and the company's infrastructure.

During the first evaluation trip to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter, Santiago was witness to the destructive forces of Joan and its impact on the tropical rainforest in the area. Returning from a trip to the Kukra River area, he commented, "Here, there is no forest anymore" (16 November 1988).

> The hurricane broke down all the business, because right now business is slow. Sometimes you find work and sometimes you can't find no work, because the business is slow and the money is getting scarce and the things are getting so high [expensive]. You see, one pound of meat right now cost one million and a half (1 US$ = 900,000 cordobas); you buy two pounds of meat that is three million cordobas! Well, and the salary can't take with that, because we don't know how much salary we are getting. Because no company start to work yet, because the sawmill is closing down and they don't know how to do it.

A few months after the hurricane, Santiago, together with his friend Alberto, also a lumber contractor, tried to obtain a private contract with COMABLUSA to extract valuable trees that were blown down by Joan. They wanted to bring the logs to Bluefields and sell them to the company. However, the plan could not be realized because they could not buy provision at the state-owned enterprise ENABAS. Their request to buy food directly from this enterprise was turned down, with the argument that ENABAS only provided goods to COMABLUSA (also a state-owned enterprise).

Despite this failure, Santiago did not remain idle. Together with Yolanda, he entered business, as so many others would do in the months after the hurricane (see Chapter 5).

> I never worked in Las Pavas [the area the company worked in after Joan, until June 1989]. After the hurricane I work in my home. Looking a little business to pass my life. Getting something and selling it to Corn Island. We buy some things here and then sell it to Corn Island: plantain, quequisque, rice, potatoes, cabbages. We brought them with this company, calling PROMARBLUE, one company in Corn Island. They have their own boat here.
>
> We sell things on the street. People come and they carry them things, or sometimes we give things on credit, for ten days or one week. We give the things and after that we gonna collect the money. Then we pass again to Bluefields.
>
> Sometimes, what we have to do, is go to Kukra Hill. And then, in Kukra Hill, buy sugar, bananas, plantains directly from the farmers and sugar from the factory [the sugar refinery "Camilo Ortega"]. Rice we also buy from the farming people, in Big Lagoon, La Palma [Africana], all of them are plenty of farming people. I stay there three or four days in Kukra to get all the things ready, then come to Bluefields and bring the things to the wharf to the company, and bring it to Corn Island.

I do that all on my own, because it is not big amounts. Maybe 20 sack of quequisque; 1000 plantains; three or four sack of sugar; two or three sack of rice. Not a big amount. [However] I make some money because I have to try to live, because you know how the life is.

Working on contract

Now [this is in 1990] I am looking to work again with the company [COMABLUSA]. If everything at COMABLUSA works again, I am going back to the *empresa*, because I like to work in the bush. Since my youth I been workin' in the bush. As I told you, before the hurricane I work permanently for COMABLUSA, but now I work on contract, which make it also possible to do other things. Because you know, salaries are low. I know, of course, that workin' on contract has consequences. Right now, I don't have *seguro* [security], before yes, but the advantages are greater than the disadvantages.

Them [COMABLUSA] send me a message to say that they want to work with me. See if we can make a deal. It just depends on what will happen later on, because they have to guarantee that. We have to think on that too. We are still waiting on this thing. It depends on the conditions. If the price is too low, we can't make it. Because the salary of the men working in the bush is so high and if the price for the lumber is too low, we can't make it. The least you have to pay for work in the bush is 60,000 to 70,000 cordobas a day plus the food. If we got a good price for the wood, we are ready to work.

We are not looking for people yet, because we are not ready. When we have the contract, then we gonna look for people. What we [the contractors] have to do, is to get the provision, get some money — the contractor has to keep some money for anything you have to buy — go to Kukra Hill [the new exploitation area will be Ñaris River, located north of Kukra Hill] and get a big truck and carry things right into the bush. When we get to the bush we have to stay a few days to make a little *rancho*. Then right to the centre, one goes to this side, the next to this, the next one to this side [he draws the moves on a piece of paper forming an asterix with the *rancho* as its centre]. Each one keeping his own line.

Every man, sometimes working by the day, sometimes by task, depending on the conditions. Sometimes it come better by the day, sometimes by task. The man have to carry axe and machete. And saw too; the company [COMABLUSA] say they get a motorsaw for all the contractors. The company pay some money in advance and then every 15 days the payroll.

Tomorrow we will go to Kukra with them [COMABLUSA] to see one truck to carry the men. I gonna see men to work with, men who can work in the bush, because them men here [in Bluefields] they no good. They *vagos*, they no good for work in the bush. After two or three days they leave. Men in Kukra they are better. I know some men over there. The most important thing right now is to find a man who knows the place good and can bring us straight into the bush, to the good places to work. Pay him

> well and not losing time. I go to see if I find him, him an old friend of mine. We work together before, for the companies and so on.
>
> Now I have to think well about the money and the work because if after 15 days the company say, "We don't have money for the payroll," the men will leave.

Finally, Santiago got a new contract with COMABLUSA, to cut trees in the Ñaris River area (a contract for one million feet). There he worked for three months during the summer of 1990 as a contractor in charge of 24 men. The job included all the "traditional" tasks of harvesting lumber: making *carriles* [lanes] cutting trees, preparing logs for transport by tractors, and making trails to carry the logs to the river. He and his men finished the job on 1 May 1990.

Every 15 days Santiago would travel to Bluefields to pick up the payroll for his men and to buy new provisions. During one of these short visits, he told me that he had heard that COMABLUSA would continue operating, because the Swedish government had already invested large amounts of money in its modernization, an investment that they did not want to lose.

According to Santiago, only a small portion of the logs had been carried away, some to Rama and some to the Sam Brown settlement on the Kama River. The company told him that the rest would be transported during the summer of 1991.

After finishing this job, Santiago was confronted once again with the problematic financial and chaotic organization of COMABLUSA; he had to wait more than six months to receive payment for his time and work. Fortunately, his men received their salaries on time.

> That's good luck. I don't owe the men, only me and the company have the trouble. All the men got paid, but all the contractor people they not fixed nothing. I don't know. That is my interest, I want to know how the situation is, because really I need work. And I will tell you, we can't work because we can't know how we gonna pay and what a foot of lumber gonna pay. We don't know nothing of these things. I don't know how they are coming now. If they wanna give us a good price or still we are gonna work contract or no one get no contract. Can't say how they wanna work.

"*No, no, no, we can't do nothing*"

When I asked Santiago if he thought that other companies would come to the coast, his answer turned out to be an interesting analysis of the economic crisis, in which life experiences and reflections were summarized in his perception of the situation:

> I never hear no nothing about other companies, if a next company is coming or not. Yes, little business people like that, but no company. And we can't do nothing with them little business people. No, no, no, we can't do nothing! How is the situation in Nicaragua, here in the coast with this sawmill.... You need a company. You need a good company here, because this coast really broke down. Every people getting scarce of money. We

> need here in Bluefields a good company that take care of everything and no little business people. A good company with big amounts of money. Right now you can find a hundred people, that's how people running out of work, looking work all around. Everyday plenty people ask me, "Santiago, when do you start?" And I tell them, "I can't tell you. Even myself I don't know when I gonna start."

In June 1990, he participated in another evaluation study of the damages caused by Joan. For 18 days, he joined a team of ecologists traveling to the Ñaris, Kama, and Kukra Rivers. The salary for this work was fairly high compared with local wages. Regarding the chance of more work the following year, he said, "I say all right, if I get the chance I can get going with them. Them, they know me [laughing]!"

Being "deaf"

Negotiations with COMABLUSA about a new contract are a constant element in Santiago and his family's struggle to earn a living. In September 1990, having been without work for more than two months already, he was once again trying to make a deal with the enterprise, but the uncertainties were prevailing. Walking the streets of Bluefields, he was trying to find a job in the lumber sector, but "no business" (his words) could be found. "Maybe next week, maybe in 14 days, maybe next month." One week later when I met him again, he told me, "No news yet from the company, but I stop studying that. If I continue studying that, that don't give me anything. I have to look for myself right now."

In this give and take between the company and the contractor, ad hoc decisions are made, making it difficult for him to plan, which in turn forces him to "bet on many horses." While waiting for the company to move, he established contacts with other people interested in his services, among them a *costeño* who asked him to cut Granadillo trees. However, this person left for Guatemala and did not return to Bluefields. At the same time, a rumour was circulating about the arrival of an American company interested in the extraction of wood; this attracted the attention of Santiago who was willing to work with "some Americans" (his words).

Behind all this, was the new political and the uncertain economic situation in the country, which made it risky to do business with either a company or private entrepreneurs: how can salaries and prices for provisions and lumber be established when annual inflation reaches levels of 16,000% or when new policies are not yet defined and no one seems to know what is going to happen to land, trees, and other properties? And what about the golden cordoba, the newly introduced money?

In Santiago's words, "These days nobody knows anything. They say this and some say that, but everybody is deaf right now. Me, I just listen to what them say and wait."

"Doing this and doing that"

According to Santiago, in those days there were many trees piled up at sites close to the town of Rama and along the shores of the Kama River. However, no one, even COMABLUSA, seemed to know what would be done with them. The company's sawmill in Bluefields had closed down once again in this period, because of a shortage of gasoline and the lack of some spare parts. This situation represented another uncertain factor for Yolanda, Santiago, and their children. It seemed that the state was "deaf" to the people involved in the lumber business. Once more, these were hard times for Santiago and his family. During these weeks, I had the impression that he was becoming even more thinner than he already was.

Apart from his work in the lumber sector, Santiago and Yolanda maintain contacts in the agricultural sector. As for many other coastal families, agriculture represents a last way out in situations of scarcity or when prices are so high that buying food becomes an impossibility. Yolanda has relatives along the Wawashan River, where the family has access to a piece of land for growing rice, cassava, and plantain. This guarantees food for the household, or, in Santiago's words, "for helping myself" (notice the "me" form of this expression). Moreover, because of their contacts in this area, he regularly buys crops or animals from the local farmers and sells them in Bluefields, then sells products from the city to the farmers.

In October 1990, Santiago still had no work. The situation with COMABLUSA had not improved.[6] No one seemed to know how the company was going to operate. Without capital or help from the new government, the future of the company looked very dark, as it had no production plan and no work for its personnel. At the end of the month, the new director told Santiago that he could go to the Wawashan River to cut mahogany trees, that he would give him a saw and 15 million cordobas. Santiago's reaction:

> What I am going to do with 15 million cordobas...? I don't blame Berger [the director], him a poor man like me. Him he is just the boss. Ok, but if the government don't give him money, he cannot do anything either. He said, he talked yesterday with the big boss of Bluefields, Mr Guthrie, but I don't know what come out of that. Me, I am not a politician, me I just know that there is no work right now. We need a big company here who buy the lumber or the fish, but they say they don't want the Americans carry all the lumber to the States. But then what are we going to do with all this lumber when we have one thousand men in the bush? Nicaragua has only tree million people so we better sell all that lumber to the States or Japan or Guatemala, because in Guatemala they have seven million people.

Once more Santiago and Yolanda decided to start a little business. They sold one of the electric saws that they had bought with money that Santiago had earned earlier the same year (US$500). With this small amount of capital, they bought two cows in the Wawashan River area and sold them in Bluefields on credit. Unfortunately, this transaction caused them some problems because they received the money later than expected.

The scale of this kind of operations is small, according to Santiago, "No big thing you know." As an example, he told me that if you buy something for 100 million cordobas in the "bush," you can sell it for about 110 million in Bluefields. Subtracting transport expenses, the profit is about 6 million cordobas. "I don't know how I live these days, but I manage, doing this and doing that. And the people they know me so if they have some work they look for me."

During his trip to Wawashan, Santiago used the opportunity to look for valuable trees (in this case mahogany), which he marked for a possible future contract. He also established contact with a well-known local entrepreneur, who had shown interest in doing business with him. However, money was again a problem, and, therefore, the contact did not result in anything concrete.

Talking about these issues, Santiago made it clear that he prefers to work with the company (COMABLUSA) despite all the troubles. Working with the company is more secure, according to him, because both parties involved are really interested in the business and, moreover, you have a contract.

The critical situation continued during November 1990. There was no work and, to make things even worse, the town was suffering from a scarcity of food due to political problems that arose at the end of October when a group of ex-Contras and right-wing Blufileños occupied the municipal offices and some other local buildings in support of the upheaval in the Fifth district (see Chapter 4). Concerning COMABLUSA, all sorts of rumours were circulating in town, one stating that the company would be closed down and taken over by somebody else.

A new contract

In May 1991, Santiago worked for a short time for a Spanish company that was interested in extracting lumber from the region. He went to the Wawashan area for a week to "hunt logs": select trees and mark them for a possible extraction. However, the company did not show any interest in continuing work in the area.

In June, the family sold another saw, this time for US$600. Once again, the final payment presented a problem, as the man who bought the machine managed to pay only US$200. They had to wait several months for the remaining $400.

Then, one month later, Santiago was asked to head a project financed by the International Development Agency of the United States (USAID). This project was part of the program to create new employment, a countermeasure to the UNO's new policy of reducing the state bureaucracy. In coordination with IRENA-Bluefields, a plan was formulated to thin the forest area affected by hurricane Joan by removing secondary species to keep the regenerating primary forest in good shape. Because of his experience, Santiago was recommended as the best candidate for the job by the director of IRENA and was accepted by the USAID delegate.

The project will be carried out over two years, putting a temporary end to many of the uncertainties facing Santiago and his family. It was understandable that, when the project was postponed for about one month, Santiago once more doubted the arrival of "better times." Almost daily, he could be found in the IRENA office inquiring about the USAID project. At the same time he tried to maintain other

contacts. Finally in August, he signed a contract with IRENA-USAID. In negotiations over his salary, he did not come out completely satisfied, but the two-year job security swayed his decision.

Conclusions

From his early days as an apprentice in the lumber sector to his present-day work for USAID, Santiago Rivas' labour experiences constitute a colourful story of dealing with uncertainties and changes. On the one hand, the large number of different jobs he has held give us an idea of the continuous ups and downs of the coastal economy during the past five decades. The occupational path he has followed reveals the erratic nature of the "pull" forces represented by foreign and national (coastal) companies and entrepreneurs who over the years have exploited the region's natural resources and labour force.

As Santiago, himself, so astutely observed regarding the tropical rainforest, the nature of this exploitation has changed very little. Although technology has improved and contractual arrangements between companies and workers have changed, it is still very much "the same business," i.e., looking for work in the forest, organizing the various tasks involved in lumber production, and getting paid on time and in accordance with one's work. However, the path Santiago has walked in his labour career has also been influenced by "pull" forces. These forces have paved the (probably unique) direction in which Santiago has moved to look for work, satisfy basic needs, and resolve livelihood problems. His experiences provide a seldom-seen insight into coastal history.

From a single contact acquired through family ties that opened for him the door to a job in "the bush," he has become part of a much wider network of social relations. It is through this network of acquaintances, friends, kin, and what we might call professional contacts that he has been able to look for and actually find (new) jobs. Simultaneously, in many cases by way of these jobs, he has established new contacts.

Making a living and surviving on the Atlantic Coast are practically impossible without the construction, investment in, and use of these networks. In Santiago's case, the relative success of his career (given the options available) is closely connected to the quality of his social network in combination with such factors as his intelligence and expertise. By success, I do not mean maximization of income or profits, but the optimal satisfaction of concrete needs. In this way, the example of Santiago not only reveals the shortcomings of most of the interpretations of coastal history so far elaborated, it also offers us a key for further research.

This conclusion does not contradict Santiago's narrative in which he tends to portrait himself very much as a self-made man. In fact, this account inform us about the particular cultural expressions that he uses to describe and explain his role. The drawing of this portrait could be interpreted as a sign of persistence and independence in facing the instability and insecurity of coastal (and Nicaraguan) society and economy. This picture of a self-made stands also in sharp contrast with

the image of the passive coastal man or woman, the victim of imperialism, capitalism, or other reified systems, in short, of forces outside his or her control. At the same time, we have seen how this self-portrait of a man, who does not owe anything to anybody and whose only politics is working and receiving his twice-weekly salary, has played a role in the career path Santiago has paved and continues to pave.

A final issue that relates to the construction of the image of a self-made man concerns the impact of gender. Referring once more to Bertaux-Wiame's case of French migrants, we might assume that Santiago's account is strongly coloured by perceptions of gender roles. We may conclude, therefore, that coastal women will not only tell us different (labour or life) histories, but also in quite different forms.

The many occupations of Santiago draw attention to economic and political changes and events that have taken place at regional and national levels. His moves back and forth, over time and into different areas, between the forestry sector, agriculture at the farm level, cultivation on plantations and haciendas, point out some of these modifications or transformations. It is to this that I will turn in Chapter 7, placing his story both in a longer and broader historical framework.

Notes

1. For a similar approach, see Mintz (1960).

2. Unfortunately, as we will see in Chapter 7, we do not always have the information to elaborate other or additional life or labour stories.

3. This included a critical review of a first draft of this chapter by Santiago during the month of September 1991 in Bluefields. However, the comments he made during this session have not led to any significant modifications in the text.

4. Santiago, gifted with the capacity to speak Spanish and English, told his story almost completely in creole-English, the tongue he prefers to speak. However, this creole-English was obviously an "adapted" version, as he did his best to take into account my ability to understand him, given the sometimes strong differences from "regular" English words and grammar. Interestingly, I had a similar experience with my creole colleagues at CIDCA-Bluefields who were good enough to "adapt" their speech to my limited ability to understand, especially when I first arrived in the city and the office. When my understanding of their native tongue gradually improved, they simultaneously reduced their degree of adaptation. Unfortunately, I did not stay long enough! In this chapter I have tried to reproduce, as accurately as possible, the ways in which Santiago pronounced his words and constructed his phrases.

5. In 1955, the US company, Wrigley's, installed a chewing gum factory in the town of Waspan on the Coco River. This plant operated until 1979 (for details, see Jenkins 1986: 217-218).

6. In September 1990, it was said that COMABLUSA would close down because of lack of funds. The workers of the sawmill did not receive their salaries for the last month; a solution seemed hard to find (*Radio Zinica*, 3 September 1990). At the same time the company wanted to obtain a new concession to extract lumber in an area affected by the hurricane and to sell it to a US company. This was obstructed by the intervention of IRENA's director George Brooks and RAAS' governor Alvin Guthrie, who were not willing to sell regional resources to foreign companies as had happened in the past.

On 3 December 1990, the workers at the sawmill occupied the company offices, demanding their last three months' salaries. They also accused the governor Alvin Guthrie (who is also the head of the board of directors of the company) of showing no interest in the company in an attempt to ruin it, thus freeing the way for its privatization. Meanwhile a new interim director was appointed (Neil Hebbert).

7. THE MAKING AND REMAKING OF COASTAL HISTORY, 1880-1992

Introduction

The multifaceted labour history of Santiago Rivas (Chapter 6) shows that the coastal history of this century has been closely related to the coming and going of foreign companies interested in the rapid exploitation of the rich natural resources that could and still can be found in the region. With Santiago's story, I have tried to reveal some of the crucial aspects of the dialectical interplay between the labour and life stories of individuals, their places in changing social networks and the wider political economic history of the coastal region.

In this second chapter on the historical features of survival in the Atlantic area, I have two goals. On the one hand, I want to place Santiago's story within a longer historical perspective, going back to the beginning of the profound transformations set in motion by the arrival and establishment of foreign companies from the 1880s onward.[1] On the other hand, I intend to give a more detailed picture of the changes in the region during this period, with special attention to what has happened in the area of our specific interest, the Bluefields hinterland.

Through the use of little-used sources of information, my goal is to highlight some of the ways in which the coastal people have experienced and dealt with these changes. As we will see, although coastal society remained in many ways isolated from the rest of the country and excluded from government plans and projects, it was certainly affected by what happened elsewhere, in Nicaragua and outside the country. At the same time, coastal men and women were not just passive actors, or worse, innocent victims, in the process of social change. They shaped and reshaped, or at least tried to do so, the world around them, both individually and collectively as much as this world formed their destiny.

In this chapter, I look at this process of change during the last hundred years as it passed gradually through four different stages during which particular patterns of the coastal political economy emerged.[2] The first of these stages gave rise to an enclave-dominated economy as numerous foreign capitalist companies, mostly US-based, established strategic economic centres along the coast. Although we have data on the nature of these enterprises and the volume of their operations, there are few sources available that can provide us with detailed information about how coastal people experienced this period, which began in the 1880s and reached a climax around 1929.

The second stage, set in motion by the world economic depression that followed the stock market crash in New York in 1929 was strongly influenced by the political turmoil in Nicaragua caused by Augusto C. Sandino. This period is best characterized by two paths of change. On the one hand, it witnessed the

disintegration of the coastal enclave economy — more accentuated in some zones than in others — marked by a profound and prolonged economic crisis. On the other hand, it was the era in which Anastasio Somoza came to power and paved the road to dictatorship. This stage spans the period from 1929 to the end of the 1940s.

The second world war and its conclusion provided the feeding ground for the third stage, during which many areas of the Atlantic Coast became (once again) the scene of economic enterprise, this time also of coastal origin. In fact, during the decade after the war, several coastal enterprises occupied the place left by foreign companies, which had abandoned the region. Moreover, the region became a focus for development plans, designed by government and non-governmental institutions alike, aimed at "modernization." Although this process of modernization was promoted by the institutions of the state and backed by successive US governments, its significance can only be understood when we take into account how coastal people appropriated elements of it. In doing so, they balanced on the thread of the liberal ideology on which the Somoza dictatorship was founded, with the years increasingly criticising its shortcomings, but never completely rejecting it. This stage covers the decades between 1950 and 1980.

The revolutionary triumph of the FSLN in 1979 marked the beginning of the fourth stage in which the Atlantic Coast has come to play a new political role in Nicaraguan society. Political and military conflicts formed the basis for the autonomy project as formally approved in 1987 by the National Assembly; as a result, in 1990, two autonomous regional governments emerged. At the same time, as I have documented in Parts I and II, the coastal economy experienced an ongoing process of change.

The humming wheels of industry and trade: 1880-1929

> The banana planter, producer of the green gold in this region, is the person who maintains the urban population. Traders, lawyers, public employees, artists, usurers, all these people, this crowd of social evil that does not work, but drinks, eats, plays, dances, sleeps and spends without knowing where their money comes from, lives from the banana.
> (*Excelsior*, 21 March 1933; my translation)

Santiago Rivas and with him many others, started their careers during what we can call the aftermath of the boom period that the Atlantic coastal economy experienced during the first three decades of this century. This era of rapid economic expansion and significant changes in coastal society was set in motion by the arrival, from 1880 on, of foreign companies, mainly from the USA, interested in the rapid exploitation of the rich natural resources of the area.[3]

After obtaining, without major difficulty, lucrative concessions from the Nicaraguan government headed by the Liberal José Santos Zelaya (1893-1909, see below), these enterprises established themselves in strategic production centres in what are now the northern and southern autonomous regions. Engines of industrial

capitalist development, these companies operated with an intensity and on a scale never before seen in the region or in the country at large. From 1880 to 1930, as a result of these activities, the coastal economy experienced an economic boom of untold dimensions, producing large amounts of gold and silver, lumber, and bananas.[4] However, this profound transformation of the coastal environment was characterized by the emergence of socioeconomic and political relations that constituted an enclave system (Vilas 1987: 8-16, 1990b: 99-113).

It was in the enclaves — mines, lumber, and banana enterprises — that the foreign companies concentrated equipment, investments, and operations. They shipped not only coastal resources, but also their profits to their home countries instead of using them locally to guarantee sustained medium or long-term production. Thus, even in the boom periods, this kind of capitalist enterprise expanded little, if at all, into the surrounding areas (Torres Rivas 1989[1964]: 105).

Within the enclaves, the companies exercised strong control over the contracted labour force through their own vigilance and through the system of company-owned and run shops or commissaries (*comisariatos*). In these shops, the workers, miskitos, sumus, mestizos coming from the Pacific, and recently arrived black immigrants were obliged to buy their basic needs, as the enterprises paid them in the form of coupons instead of in cash.[5] It was also through this system that the coastal labourers and their families became rapidly used to imported goods such as sugar, coffee, sweets, cheese, beer, tobacco, soap, condensed milk, liquor, and luxury shoes and clothing (*The Bluefields Weekly*, 7 June 1930). This impeded the development of a strong internal market for basic and other commodities, further hindered by the lack of means of transportation and communication both within the Atlantic region and between the Pacific and Atlantic areas.

With the enclave system, the ethnic occupational hierarchy in the region was modified considerably. Most affected was the creole population, which lost its former top position. In the economic domain, they were replaced by the directors and managers of the foreign companies. In politics, from the turn of the century, their positions became occupied by mestizo bureaucrats from the Pacific region (Gordon 1987: 138). I do not know whether creole men and women were confronted in similar ways with this new situation.

An article published in *The American* (11 September 1910), a newspaper published in English and directed at US citizens on the Coast, gives us an idea of the changes caused by the arrival of the companies:

> **East coast awakened**
> The era of commercial activity on the East Coast of Nicaragua seems to have arrived. Demands for labour are coming from all directions. Within the next 30 days every idle man, every man discharged from the army and every laborer who returns to Nicaragua will find employment. When hostility broke out in October of last year, hundreds of Nicaraguan's laboring classes sought employment in adjoining republics, and it is expected that these people will begin at once to return.
>
> Every sector of the East Coast seems to have awakened as from a slumber. Calls for hundreds of men are coming from the Río Grande, from

> the mines and from plantations. One thousand men are wanted at once on the Great River [Río Grande], where extensive work is progressing, the Pan American Plantation is sending scores of men to its lands, the Kansas City Plantation Company has issued a call for 500 men, the International Fruit Company and several other plantation companies are about to embark on the work of developing that rich section and will soon be employing hundreds more. The Topaz Mines on the Río Mico is urgently seeking 100 additional miners, the plantations along the Escondido, in Pearl Lagoon and elsewhere have men out scouring the woods in every direction picking up every available man.
>
> This means much to the East Coast. It means the expenditure of thousands of dollars right in our midst. Bluefields being the natural commercial centre will of course be the chief beneficiary in a commercial way. The money paid to the workmen, the outlay of cash for supplies, for transportation charges, for wages will find its way into the channels that lead through this centre.
>
> The impetus given by the new order of things, to the business of this Coast, so long held up by the action of the former officials at Managua, is being felt in every quarter. Business houses in this city are complaining because of the great volume of business; the wheels of industry are humming.

We have, however, very little detailed information about how men and women growing up in this period experienced this "awakening" and how their lives in the broadest sense — not only economically as the enclave concept tends to stress — were influenced by these new circumstances and opportunities.

One of the few sources of information that I know of, concerning this question, is provided a small group of researchers from the CIDCA-office in Bluefields who have started to collect a series of oral histories about Bluefields' past — before it is too late. Headed by the well-known Bluefields historian, Hugo Sujo Wilson, to whom I referred earlier, this group has published a first summary of these stories (Sujo Wilson 1991: 33-39). They confirm what other authors had already noticed (see Jenkins 1986; Vilas 1990b).

We learn first of all that the people who grew up during the enclave period remember this time mainly as "the good old days." Sujo summarizes their memories, which seem to be very positive, as follows: "There were many jobs and, therefore, large amounts of money circulating in town, banana and lumber ships were steaming back and forth, and well supplied stores, where you could buy anything you liked, were found everywhere."[6] In fact, most people consumed only imported products, which came "from out," i.e., from abroad (ibid: 33).

According to the people interviewed, the general material prosperity went hand in hand with behaviour and educational programs whose quality was much higher than it is now. Whether they also remember more gloomy events and negative effects of the presence of the companies remains a question. We may guess, however, that not everything was sunshine in these days, as working conditions were hard, competition fierce, and salaries for those who did the heavy tasks relatively low.

In the Bluefields hinterland, the production of lumber and bananas for commercial purposes started the economic boom at the beginning of the 1880s. The first company that concentrated on the commercial sale of bananas was the Bluefields-Rama Banana Company whose founders had noticed that the local indigenous population was successfully cultivating bananas on the alluvial soils of the coastal riverbanks. Thus, in Nicaragua, other Central American countries, and Jamaica, the banana companies built upon these existing agricultural practices (Ellis 1983: 35-40).

About 1885, the first exports of bananas were made to New Orleans, a city of major importance in the banana export trade during this epoch.[7] In 1899, the United Fruit Company bought the Bluefields Steamship Company, at that time the main shipping enterprise involved in the export of bananas. This event marked the regional expansion of this giant company.

United Fruit acquired about 200,000 acres of unimproved land on the coast during the first decade of this century, although it would only establish a small number of plantations. In fact, a crucial aspect of its operations was the purchase of bananas from independent farmers. The role of these independent farmers can be considered as one of the main features of banana production in the southern Atlantic region, contributing to the particular character of the enclave-dominated economy of this period.

During the 1920s, United continued its expansionist policy. In 1924, it bought the Cukra Development Company followed, in 1929, by the purchase of the Cuyamel Fruit Company. Apart from its involvement in the banana business, the company also controlled transport and communication facilities around Bluefields.[8] The Cukra Development Company resumed business as a subsidiary and became one of the most prosperous and prestigious companies in the region owning land along all the abovementioned rivers. Their holdings carried the names of US cities, like Atlanta (along the Punta Gorda River), Kansas City, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. On maps one can still find these names. The company survived until the 1960s when most of their holdings were sold to the Somoza family. I will turn to its role in the pages that follow.

Bananas

> The Bluefields Steamship Company exported during the month of October 87,000 bunches. The majority of these were taken on the Kama, Siquia, Rama and Escondido Rivers, but a considerable amount were taken on the Grande River. The Cukra River also contributed with a few thousand bunches. Taking the 87,000 as basis, one can calculate that in one year the Bluefields Steamship Company exports from Bluefields to New Orleans about 1,044,000. bunches. This amount of bananas is a favourable sign for this Department, even more when one considers that the Atlantic Fruit Company exports from Pearl Lagoon about 20,000 bunches every 15 days, or 480,000 bunches a year. Right now, due to the suspension of the trips made by the vapours of the Río Grande Steamship Company, the amount that the Bluefields Steamship Company exports, has increased. In total, we

> calculate that in one year 1,524,000 bunches are exported.
> (*La Voz del Atlántico*, 29 November 1913)

Not everything in the banana business was love and peace, however, as the many companies that operated in the region competed aggressively with each other. When, at one point, the United Fruit Company seemed to be monopolizing the fruit trade, having obtained from the government in 1904 the exclusive right to navigate the Escondido River, disputes broke out among several companies.[9] Once again, we do not have details about the consequences of these fights for the planters and workers in the enterprises. Later in this chapter, we will see that competition continued to cause problems around Bluefields.

The initiative of the Bluefields-Rama Banana Company was soon followed by the arrival of several other companies, such as the Pan-American Fruit & Fibre Co. of Kansas City with plantations along the Río Grande; the Banana Co. of the Río Grande Ltd (with English and French capital); the Kansas City Plantation Co.; the Pan-American Plantation; the International Fruit Co.; Samuel Pondler & Co. with plantations along the Wawashan, Kuringwas, and Patch Rivers; Emil Brautigam & Co., which owned plantations in the Pearl Lagoon area; the Cukra River Planting Co. (whose fruits were shipped by the Bluefields Steamship Co.); the Horter-Culture Co. with plantations along the Kukra River; the Caribbean Coast Planters Co. from Chicago, owner of plantations in the Río Grande area (2500 *manzanas*), and the Orr Fruit & Steamship Co. from New Orleans.

However, the three most important enterprises on the southern Atlantic Coast were the Cuyamel Fruit Co., the Atlantic Fruit Co., and the United Fruit Co. with its subsidiary the Cukra Development Co.[10] During the first two decades of this century, bananas were grown along the Río Grande, Escondido, Siquia, Rama, Punta Gorda, Turswani, Kukra and Kuringwas rivers by these companies on land owned by private farmers. A map of the Punta Gorda River area, drawn in 1909, shows that along both sides of this river private farmers owned most of the land, occupying parcels that varied from 60 to 500 ha (CIDCA-Bluefields archives).

The production of these farmers, of creole and mestizo origin, turned out to be of great importance in the Bluefields region; in some zones they produced as much as 40% of the total amount shipped and exported.[11] This draws our attention to the patterns of differentiation that existed within the enclave economy. In a sense, some areas became less "enclaved" than others.

Booming Bluefields

The companies employed hundreds of coastal and non-coastal workers, at the plantations and lumber camps, in the harbours of El Bluff, Rama, and Bluefields, and on the ships that carried goods from one place to another within the region. The banana business created a "circle of men–bananas–ships–men–bananas–ships that seemed without end" (Montenegro 1986: 155).

After receiving their salaries, the workers would come in groups to the town of Bluefields, which prospered due to the boom of economic activities.[12] This was not

only visible in the streets, where new shops were opened one after another, but also in the well-kept houses and gardens of its inhabitants. The men and women interviewed by Sujo's oral history group all remember this in detail.

> Its "modus vivendi" is based principally on the commercial exchange with the United States where it the export of bananas concerns and with Granada and Managua to which it sends products such as coconut oil, which is produced on Corn Island, one of the islands of the tribe. From these places it receives in its turn shoeware, liquor, cigarettes, basic goods. The Cukra Development Company, subsidiary of the United Fruit Company controls the banana business. And despite the arguments expressed in contra of this company that are not completely without ground, it is sure that the Cukra Development Company distributes among its workers and office employees a few thousand dollars each week, which constitute an important injection for the situation of this harbour (Arellano 1933: 7).

Here we must mention the vital role played by Chinese immigrants, who had come to the Coast at about the turn of the century and who within 20 years dominated almost all retail and wholesale trade in Bluefields and elsewhere in the region. Besides wholesale and retail shops, they opened restaurants, bars, laundries, photo studios, and candy and biscuit factories (Sujo Wilson 1991: 38). They were the first to introduce a mini-lottery, which created a great furore in town. Within a few years, the Chinese had built their own social club where they used to celebrate, talk about social affairs, and discuss business (see also Chapter 5). Until 1979, the Chinese immigrants and their offspring would occupy a crucial role in coastal commerce extending their activities along the various rivers and in the communities.

The economic prosperity fed, at the same time, a vivid cultural life, with movies, concerts, boxing matches, and the publication of an incredible number (for that time and certainly for these days) of local and regional newspapers, in both Spanish and English and sometimes in both languages (de Oro Solórzano 1991). It was in these newspapers, including *La Información*, that a young generation of coastal teachers, politicians, and leaders of the workers' movement made the first steps in their public careers as they used this medium to comment on the changes taking place and discuss social and political matters, sometimes becoming involved in polemical exchanges of opinions. For the companies, shops and entrepreneurs, the newspapers were a means to confirm their presence and attract new customers, as the many "colourful" advertisements demonstrate.

In the northern region of the coast, the production of bananas on a large scale was undertaken by the Standard Fruit Company, the major competitor of the United Fruit Co. in Central America. In 1925, Standard Fruit obtained concessions in the area of Puerto Cabezas, where it would control economic affairs for the next two decades. Standard's operations in this area, including the production of lumber by its subsidiary the Bragman's Bluff Lumber Co., can be said, more than its "counterpart" in the Bluefields region, as being constitutive elements of an enclave

economy. During the 1920s, Standard and Bragman's Bluff were the most important employers in the country and their buildings, sawmills, railway, and wharfs dominated the scene at Puerto Cabezas and its hinterland.[13]

Other enclaves in the northern region that attracted large numbers of workers, especially of miskito origin, were the silver and gold mines in Siuna, Rosita, and Bonanza. From 1910 on, several US companies, La Luz and Los Angeles, the Bonanza Mining Company, the Neptune Gold Mining Company, extracted, in a short time, thousands of tons of these precious metals for export to the United States. To guarantee the movement of labour and the export of silver and gold, these companies constructed a network of roads in the area, thus marking another major difference from the Bluefields region. Among the few mines in the south were the Topas Mines along the Mico River, not far from the town of Rama.

In spite of the large number of companies involved in the banana business, the total volume of bananas shipped before 1920 did not exceed 1.5 million stems. Maximum production for Nicaragua, mainly from the Atlantic Coast, was achieved in 1929 when a total of 4,160,700 stems were exported. Compared with production in Honduras the same year, which reached nearly 30 million stems, this amount seems insignificant (Karnes 1978: 120). After 1929, exports fell continuously until, by 1943, no exports were made.

Political turmoil

During the decades from 1880 to 1930, Bluefields and the Atlantic Coast were also the scene of recurring political upheaval. After Zelaya's "incorporation" of the region into the Nicaraguan territory in 1894 and the subsequent hispanization of political life and public administration, several "revolutions" took place that caused turmoil and insecurity in Bluefields and its hinterland.

In 1909, General Juan José Estrada, at the time governor of the Atlantic Coast, revolted against Zelaya. Backed by the US government, Estrada and his troops managed to push aside Zelaya, who in December that year renounced his post.[14] These events grew out of Zelaya's increasing resistance to foreign interference, to which he himself, ironically, had opened the doors. The climax to this increasingly hostile attitude came in the form of a refusal to accept a loan from some US bankers on the one hand, and, on the other, his successful efforts to frustrate the intentions of the US government to obtain concessions for building an inter-ocean canal (later built in Panama) on the southern border of Nicaragua.[15]

Zelaya's overthrow set in motion a prolonged power struggle between liberals and conservatives for the country's leadership, in which one president was followed by another in rapid succession.[16] These conflicts resulted in another revolution, also called a "civil war," in 1926. How this happened is remembered by Maxwell Atily in one of CIDCA's oral stories (Sujo Wilson 1991: 36):

> The revolution in 1926, I can remember took place on a Saturday, the 2nd of May 1926. That started the Saturday night and by daylight the Liberal party took over the palace [the government building in Bluefields] already.

> What they did was to hoist a flag, and that was representing the winner of the battle, because it represented a red flag, the Liberal flag.

On both occasions, in 1909 and 1926, the US government sent military troops (marines) to Bluefields to take control of regional affairs and to protect and guarantee the various economic interests of North American companies and businessmen (CIERA 1981; Jenkins 1986; Vargas 1989b; Vilas 1990b). According to Sujo (ibid: 36) these interventions left behind "ill feelings, bad memories and mixed feelings among the inhabitants of Bluefields."

This brief account of political and military activity ends the enclave period dominated by North American capital and enterprises thanks to lucrative concessions from the Nicaraguan government. The most obvious consequences of this domination were the exploitation of the labour force and the degradation of natural resources. There is no doubt that the economic prosperity of this era favoured the foreign interests. The boom created an almost complete dependency of the economy on exports and imports, which would hinder for decades to come the development of the coast and its integration into the national economy. The "golden years" came to a rather abrupt end due to the effects of the crash of 1929 and the worldwide depression that followed it.

Storms of despair, calamities of hunger: 1929-1945

After the depression of 1929, and the coming to power of Anastasio Somoza in 1934, a new period in the political economy of the coast was announced, although the impact of the changes would not be felt by everybody in the same way nor would people (re)act to the new circumstances in the same way. Foreign investment diminished significantly and, accordingly, interest in the region from the national government became almost nil, in spite of the fact that some capitalist enterprises continued to operate, e.g., the mining companies in the north and various lumber companies in both Atlantic regions. In the 1930s and 1940s, state bureaucrats and military troops occupied their posts without causing much turmoil in coastal society.

This new period had its origins in the worldwide depression of 1929, the same year in which Santiago Rivas (the raconteur of Chapter 6) was born. The effect of the New York stock market crash on the economies of Central America, in general, and on Nicaragua and the Atlantic Coast, in particular, were dramatic. Prices of coffee and bananas fell precipitously and, as a direct consequence, fiscal receipts dropped significantly causing large reductions in state budgets.

Access to credit was restricted and outstanding loans were called in. Payments on foreign debt were frozen and the gold standard was abandoned. Growth in Nicaragua's gross domestic product fell between 1925 and 1929 and between 1930 and 1934 decreased from 6.4% to −4.9% (Bulmer Thomas 1983: 272).

In the hinterlands of Bluefields, many of the (creole) planters abandoned their farms to look for work in town. They followed the example of thousands of others.

However, in the urban areas, prospects were not much better. Unemployment rose in both private and public sectors and the internal market contracted correspondingly.[17] On the Atlantic Coast, the lumber, banana, and mining companies (Standard Fruit, American Fruit, Mexican Fruit, Mexico Traders Steamship, Tropical Fruit, and Cukra Development companies) were all affected by the depression, as a number of newspaper articles painfully demonstrate.

Notes from la Cruz de Río Grande

They say that the tremendous monetary crisis through which this place goes is due to the transfer that the Cuyamel Fruit Company is realizing to get the United Fruit Company in its hands. It is true that all the work is being paralysed and a large number of workers find themselves without a job. After the payment that recently was made, more than 300 men were fired. Only the ones that are very needed have remained behind to supervise the cutting and transport of the fruits; this is done by three to five men in each camp.

Many people went to Punta Gorda because here work has become scarce and now more than 300 men will have to leave although they do not have the means to go to another place.

The situation is desperate and the poverty invades the homes of the people. How long will this very bad situation last? We do not know the real reason. Some think that this crisis will only last for two months. However, we do not believe this. There are prospects that it will last one year. Who will take care of this village? Who will help to resits the storm and the calamity of hunger?

(*La Información*, 23 February 1930; my translation)

A marked flurry

On Thursday of this week great excitement was created by a rumour that went the rounds to effect that the Cukra Development Company had decided on practically abandoning the Escondido and Kukra Rivers; that is: they would take no more fruit from outsiders and that even of their own fruit they would collect only what one of their barges could carry. On all sides could be seen groups of excited men of all stations commenting the news, which after all seems to be a fact and not a simple rumour. Added to this was the information that the Company would take away or tie up all their tugs and power barges leaving only one, which we suppose will be for what she can carry of the Río Grande's output. This, if it results in a settled fact, will naturally come very near putting the finishing touch on our commerce and other activities.

(*The Bluefields Weekly*, 17 May 1930)

Absolute poverty

Recently, various farmers and planters of the Escondido River have visited our editing table to explain us the state of poverty in which some families of this place find themselves. The only thing they have to eat are bananas without salt. They are so poor that they cannot even afford to buy this product. Some charitable persons from Rama have sent them salt to help

> the people that most need it. Let us hope that charitable persons from Bluefields will do the same.
> (*Excelsior*, 3 September 1930; my translation)

During the 1930s, the Coast would not recover from the economic shock of 1929. As I said before, banana production decreased down and, to make matters worse, it was affected by Sigatoka and the Panama disease. The United Fruit Co. closed its operations in 1930 leaving local affairs in the Bluefields area in the hands of the Cukra Development Co. Standard Fruit left the region at the end of the same decade, first stopping production along the Wawa River and afterwards along the Coco River. Bragman's Bluff Lumber Company closed down its sawmill in Puerto Cabezas. As a result, hundreds of workers found themselves unemployed without any alternatives available.

During this decade the contradictions and weaknesses of the enclave system became clearly visible. However, little was done to develop alternatives. This was true in the Atlantic region, but also for the country and even for the Central American isthmus at large (Torres Rivas 1989[1969]: 103).

The economic crisis at national and regional levels was further aggravated by other events of crucial importance. Between 1928 and 1932, the movements and actions of Augusto Cesar Sandino and his Army in Defense of National Sovereignty had a major impact on the population of the region and the country. Sandino's attacks on the strategic economic centres situated in the northern Atlantic region — the mines and Puerto Cabezas (home of both the Standard Fruit and the Bragman's Bluff Lumber Co.) — seriously hindered production. The mines closed as a result of an attack by Sandino's troops (see letter below) and were not reopened before 1936, two years after Sandino's assassination by soldiers of Somoza's National Guard.[18]

The situation on the Coast is perhaps most accurately described by the words of a group of worried inhabitants of Bluefields, who appealed to President José María Moncada, expressing in their own words the catastrophic situation they were going through:

> The world economic crisis which has made leaders of countries all over the world worry, has invaded this region of the Caribbean of Nicaragua in a alarming way. It is already since some time that people feel the effects of the economic situation on this Coast. The regression started with the absence of the export of rubber that did not have any demand anymore, due to the low prices offered in the foreign markets; then, it was hit by the almost complete paralysis of the export of mining resources, aggravated by the blowing up with dynamite of the "Luz and Los Angeles" and "Bonanza" mines by Augusto C. Sandino himself, on the 23rd of May 1928; this was followed by the retiring of the companies that dedicated themselves to the extraction of lumber, leaving behind only the banana industry as a means of survival.
>
> Today the situation looks very dark now that the United Fruit Company, the company that took over the place of the Cuyamel Fruit

> Company, has suspended its work in Punta Gorda and other productive centres concentrating its activities only on the maintenance of its plantations and exports of its fruit.
>
> Having come to such an extreme situation we decided to meet, as neighbours belonging to different social and political wings and presided by the Political Head of the Department, and demand measures that will help a little to go through these hard times, while in the meantime the works of the United Fruit Company are reestablished or whilst other companies will come to develop our soils.
>
> (*The Bluefields Weekly*, 7 June 1930)

From the same edition of *The Bluefields Weekly*, we learn that people protested in more than one way. Planters in the Rama area had gone on strike to show that they were not content with the (too low) banana price offered to them by the American Fruit Company. When, at one point, some planters wanted to end the strike by accepting the proposition of the enterprise, a group of hardheaded protesters "macheted" their fruit. This resulted in the arrest of 15 of them, as reported by the *Excelsior* on 11 June.

In 1931, an angry planter sent a letter to the same newspaper (published 11 February) to express his discontent about the operations of the agent of the Mexican Fruit Company, whom he accused of abusing his position to enrich himself and the Bluefields Mercantile Company whose services he used to pay the planters.

Strikes among planters and workers of the different companies were not uncommon. We have data on the following strikes: in 1921, by workers of the Cuyamel Fruit Company along the Escondido River; in 1922, by workers of the Cukra Development Company; in 1924, by mine-workers; in 1925, by the workers of banana plantations in La Cruz de Río Grande; in 1930 and 1932, by labourers of the Standard Fruit Company in Puerto Cabezas.[19]

With the exception of the events in La Cruz de Río Grande, where the strike ended in a bloody massacre, we know very little about the protests, backgrounds, specific demands, forms of organization, leaders, and outcomes. Did the workers in the different camps have contact with each other? Did they receive any support from colleagues in the Pacific region where, during the same period, strikes broke out in Managua and Corinto? Did they also protest in more incidental and less overt ways? Were these forms of resistance only by men? Did women and children play a role? These questions still need to be answered.

Effects of the second world war

The beginning of the second world war only worsened the already difficult economic situation on the Coast. Once more it became clear what it meant for the region to be part of the international capitalist market with its booms, busts, and regular political and military upheavals on a large scale. Given the unfavourable circumstances for continuing exploitation of resources on the Atlantic Coast, many of the companies left the country. Most of the lumber and banana ships also withdrew from the harbours of Bluefields, El Bluff, and Puerto Cabezas as they

were used to transport arms and other war equipment to Europe (from the USA). As a result, the Atlantic Coast experienced a heavy economic downturn with regard to both exports and imports. In 1944, the situation became so critical that the Nicaraguan government had to sent a ship, from the Pacific Coast via the Panama Canal, with basic goods, such as flour, beans, rice, and corn, to Bluefields (*La Información*, 20 February 1944).

Nicaragua's economy as a whole, in contrast, suffered less from the war effort, as it survived on the basis of the country's gold reserves, which, in fact, came from the Atlantic region. In Managua, these reserves were used to expand industrial activities (Dunkerley 1990: 122).

To illustrate the economic conditions on the coast, I cite a letter written by the secretary of the rural and urban workers union of Bluefields, the *Obrerismo Organizado* (1927-46), which was linked with the more progressive forces of liberalism, to the Minister of Agriculture and Labour (*La Información*, 5 March 1944; my translation):

> Bluefields, 28th of February 1944
>
> As the Secretary of the Local Section of the Nicaraguan union *Obrerismo Organizado* and with proper respect, I have the honour to bring to your learned consciousness that this Organization had a General Assembly on the 17th of February of this year. At this assembly more than 200 workers of this place were present to consider the very precarious situation in which the coastal labourer encounters himself due to the high prices of basic goods. This throws a dark shadow in every home because of the great problems that we face to acquire these products, since the salary we earn is really very low and in no way in harmony with the costs of living.
>
> The assembly pronounced therefore that this situation in which the coastal labour force finds itself should be explained to you, taking into account the high degree of justice behind it. The assembly asks you to intervene with your characteristic democratic spirit so that enterprises and private owners in this department increase the salaries of the workers to a fair level. The workers, due to low salaries are facing such a difficult economic situation that soon they have to give up because of physical weakness and exhaustion of energy, caused by their rude jobs and the lack of alimentation. In order to give you a better and more complete perception of our demand, we present you as detailed as possible the daily expenses of a badly fed worker compared with the salary that (s)he earns, in the following way:

half pound of rice	C$0.19
one pound of beans	0.40
half pound of sugar	0.19
four ounces of butter	0.62
salt and spices	0.23
one leaf of bread	0.25
one plantain	0.15
one tortilla	0.10

black coffee	0.10
charcoal, matches	0.50
labour force (cook)	1.00
Total basic expenses	$C3.73
washing of clothes	C$0.50
lodger	0.50
electricity	0.15
Total daily expenses	C$4.88

Actually, a worker (*jornalero*) owns for eight hours of daily work four cordobas. Hence, compared with his daily expenses, this results in a negative saldo of C$0.88. Note, this worker does not have money to eat meat nor drink milk due to the extremely high prices of these products. And let us forget about any other regular meal.

One can deduce from this that an efficient worker needs a balanced alimentation to reach maximum rendiment of his labour. And sir, what could we tell you about how we are going to cover our bodies when we do not have enough money for our food? And how are we going to fight against diseases? We need something to dress, a bit of comfort, hygiene and some money to be able to take care of a small sickness. This would increase our expenses with two or three cordobas a day.

Thus, a worker, father of two or more children, together with his wife cannot satisfy all the needs of his home with such a miserable salary. Every day he will reduce more his alimentation so that his children will not go through the streets begging for food and taking what is not theirs, to avoid that tomorrow they will not belong to a scoundrel youth inclined to delinquency.

Therefore sir, we, the Organized Workers of the Atlantic Coast, protected by the postulates of the Excellent Mister President of the Republic, General Anastasio Somoza who has offered to improve conditions of the working class, demand that we will be given, as a principle of social justice, an increase of our salaries in virtue of the arguments that we explained to you truly and clearly. We demand as a minimum salary: C$7.50 (*jornaleros*); C$10 for office employees; and $C15 to 20 for the masters of the different sectors.

Awaiting a resolution that, we do not doubt, will be favourable, I sign this letter with esteem and consideration, sincerely yours,

Fernando García O. (secretary)

Anastasio Somoza to whom the union directed their protests and demands, had become president in 1936. When the second world war broke out, he already had accumulated considerable personal and family wealth, despite the economic recession to which the country was subjected. During and after the war this process was "accelerated" by plunder through the state and mediation of national rules of

competition, including contraband, merchandising of bootleg liquor, and levies on exports of beef, minerals, and textiles. Somoza also owned 50 cattle ranches and 46 coffee *fincas* and he was involved in a wide range of industries (e.g., aluminium, paper, cement, tobacco, meat), multinational companies (Nestle, United Brands), and more than 500 limited liability companies. He was also director of the Pacific Railroad Company. The Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN), the political party under the control of the dictator, received 5% of all public salaries (Wheelock 1985: 189-201; Dunkerley 1990: 113).

After the war, these practices would be continued in a manner unprecedented in Latin American history. Strategic repression of the labour movement by Somoza and the National Guard was essential for his practices. For example, in 1936, he supported a strike against the Sacasa government, but shortly after he had seized power, he began to repress the organizers of the strike, the Nicaraguan Labour Party (PTN). Later, he sometimes gave in to the demands of certain sectors of the urban labour force, while rejecting the petitions of others, dividing labour rather than subjecting it to violence across the board. According to Dunkerley (ibid: 105), in doing so, Somoza was more discerning than his Central American counterparts. Whether he replied to the letter from the Bluefields' union, we do not know. We do know, however, that the workers' situation remained miserable.

During the second world war, the Coast became once more of economic interest, although for a very short period. Various US rubber companies obtained concessions from the Somoza government to extract rubber, a vital resource for the allied forces at war.[20] In the Bluefields region, two US companies controlled rubber production: Rubber Reserve Corporation, which also operated along the Coco River with its centre at Bilwaskarma and its contractor Hecht, Levis & Kahn Inc.; and the Manhattan Rubber Reserve Company, whose centre of extraction was Kukra Hill. Production was stimulated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Labour and inspected by US experts who came to visit the area. Once the war was over, the rubber boom (1942-1944) came to an abrupt end.

Another manifestation of renewed interest was the construction in 1942 of the experimental agricultural stations in El Rama ("El Recreo") and Kukra Hill. Their aim was to contribute to the improvement of agricultural and livestock production in the tropical humid area of the Atlantic Coast. During the following decades various experiments were conducted and new strains of cattle and chickens were introduced; the centres also tried to plant new varieties of trees and palms. The influence of both centres was limited as they had problems communicating the results of their experiments to the farmers. However, they served as a learning school for several of the regional leaders in charge of the institutions involved in agriculture.

The end of the war did not bring a halt to the bad economic situation on the Coast. Another letter sent to *La Información* (31 May 1946) makes this very clear:

> In the days that our currency, the cordoba, had the same value as the (US) dollar, a *machetero* [somebody who worked with a machete] owned in most parts of the Atlantic Coast 50 cents plus his food for each task or a day; and

this *machetero* could buy with the 12.00 cordobas that he saved every month, the following things:

1 pair of shoes	1.00
1 blue shirt	0.80
1 working trousers	1.25
1 underpants	0.35
1 regular belt	0.50
1 vest (Otiz)	0.75
1 piece of soap	0.10
1 Guillet	0.50
1/2 pound of tobacco	0.55
1/2 bottle of aguardiente	0.50
To have a haircut	0.25
Total	C$6.10
Money to buy medicines etc.	5.90
Total	C$12.00

All this would cost actually:

1 pair of shoes	15.00
1 blue shirt	10.00
1 working trousers	20.00
1 underpants	3.50
1 regular belt	3.50
1 vest (Otiz)	7.00
1 piece of soap	1.20
1 Guillet	0.30
1/2 pound of tobacco	4.00
1/2 bottle of aguardiente	5.00
To have a haircut	1.25
Total	C$70.75

Hence, we can observe that what a worker could buy before with only C$6.10, will cost him today C$70.75. The worker who with his machete tries to survive and take care of his family is nowadays going through great difficulties. Today the salaries on the different farms are between 2.00 and 2.50 cordobas a day regards jobs such as cutting pasture-land etcetera. The one who earns two cordobas will hardly accumulate 48.00 cordobas a month; the one who earns 2.50 cordobas a day or for each task will at the end of the month have accumulated 60.00 cordobas. However, if they get sick, maybe they will not receive their salaries nor will they have money to pay the doctor their medicines. And to think that this worker has children and a wife, how is he going to manage to maintain his whole family? We cannot believe that this is the reason why many workers compromise

> themselves with one boss, with another and with the next one, asking them money in advance on account of jobs they promise to do. Resulting in the fact that they do not know anymore for whom they will work, continuing in this way a life full of corruption since the days that our currency the CORDOBA dropped to the ground.
>
> We all know that the majority of the working population lives a time of hunger and nudity and that in many cases they escape this situation and tranquilize their worries by drinking that leads to worse situations, especially among the poorer households. Sometimes this even leads to obstinacy. Do we want to save the lives of the guilty ones whom we suppose to be responsible for all this? What to do? To reflect with prudence and with a humanitarian gesture about the above exposed to safe the disgrace of the workers who find themselves in a desperate situation due to bad salaries in our country.

Uneven development and modernization: 1945-1960

Several authors have characterized the post-war period in Central America as the era of increasingly uneven development guided by the ideology of modernization (Torres Rivas 1989[1969]: 118-119; Peréz Brignoli 1989: 133-156; Dunkerley 1990: 171-219). The modernization process in the isthmus was heavily supported by the US government and international institutions, such as the World Bank and the United Nations. As a result, Central America became increasingly tied to Washington, both economically and politically. These relations were expressed in bilateral commercial treaties, privileged access to the US market, and direct US involvement, often accompanied by military presence, in many internal political affairs of the five Central American countries.

On the one hand, modernization contributed to economic growth that favoured a small number of people. On the other, it further deepened already existing political and socioeconomic contradictions, generating at the end of the 1980s a situation in which more than 10 million people lived in absolute poverty. Moreover, in 1990, the total debt of Central America reached US$20 billion (Annis 1990: 107).

In Nicaragua, modernization found its most significant expression in the rapid expansion and diversification of export-oriented agriculture.[21] The Nicaraguan state, under the control of the Somozas became producer and provider of infrastructure and credit. During the post-war decades, the growth of financial institutions, partly using funds from abroad, was significant. The state also became supervisor of a series of "development" programs and projects aimed at the "progress" of the country and, in the Coastal region, at the revival of economic activity.

Before the second world war, the National Bank of Nicaragua had already initiated a credit program to stimulate rice production (from 1939).[22] After the war, other programs promoted, again, cultivation of bananas and the buying of agriculture machinery (from 1948). In the same year a plan was launched to create an "*oficina de fomento*" to encourage agriculture and to serve as an interface between the government and farmers.

In 1949, this idea was institutionalized in the form of a ministry of "*fomento*," which later became the Instituto Nacional de Fomento (INFONAC) in 1953. The coast would become the main focus of INFONAC's plans and programs. In its first year, it presented a report on the possibility of cultivating oil-producing plants, including African palm oil (a task ordered by Somoza). In 1956, INFONAC presented a plan for the development of agriculture, followed in 1961 and 1962 by livestock programs focused on introducing new cattle varieties.

At the same time, the Atlantic region was turned into an agricultural frontier absorbing, one after another, thousands of rural families displaced as a result of the rapid expansion of cotton and cattle production on the Pacific coast and in the interior departments. As we saw in Chapter 3, several of these families settled in the Bluefields hinterland, looking for a new living as far south as the Punta Gorda River.

This is a very general picture of the post-war changes encompassed by the "modernization" project in which the state increasingly assumed a directive role in reviving capitalist development (Vilas 1990b; CIDCA 1984). From this account, however, it is difficult to get a clear idea whether and how the urban and rural coastal population were affected by "modernization." Were men and women actively involved in these changes? Did they shape or reshape their results? In other words, how did people deal with plans, programs, and projects coming from Managua? Did they design and execute local initiatives? How was everyday economic life affected?

For example, it is hard to believe that wholesale and retail trade came to a stop after most foreign companies had left the region. Did the Chinese merchants and other traders/shop-owners in Bluefields suddenly interrupt or even stop their buying and selling?[23] With reference to Chapter 4, we can confirm that the answer is no, although they were seriously affected by the overall decline in business. On the other hand, did the farmers in the Bluefields hinterland and other coastal areas suddenly and completely abandon banana production or did they give up farming altogether? Did they all migrate to Bluefields? As Chapter 3 and the story of Santiago Rivas prove, this was not the case.

In an attempt to find more detailed answers to these questions I propose, in this section, to follow the writings of a correspondent of *La Información* named Beltrán Bustamante Osorno. Apart from his job as reporter this man also worked his farm on the Escondido River. Reading the articles he wrote during the years after 1945, we will be able to decipher some of the paths that coastal men and women followed in their attempts to make a living. On one of these roads, we find the names of several coastal business families, who kept lumber and banana exports and other forms of trade alive by making use of personal experience and commercial and social networks established over the years, both within and outside the coastal region. Interestingly, all these families have immigrant roots.

In the first section entitled "Business goes on," I briefly discuss the role of these local businessmen who were important economic and social agents in coastal affairs: a role so far not seriously discussed in analyses of the changes that took place in this era. In "Struggling along the riversides," our attention will shift to the life of the planters along the Escondido and Kama Rivers, about whom our reporter regularly

wrote articles. This will give us an insight into how the people living in the hinterland continued to try to make a living within the "modernization" process of which they became a part in one way or another.

Business goes on

The first article, signed by Beltrán Bustamante (7 July 1948), concerns an interview with a US millionaire, Evander Hamilton. This entrepreneur had come to Bluefields to arrange the purchase of bananas, the largest amount possible, and to explore the possibility of buying coconuts. His goal was to expand the trade in tropical fruit of the Hamilton Brothers Company based in Tampa, Florida, which he ran with his brother.

Beltrán Bustamante conducted this interview with the assistance of a translator named Harry Brautigam, whom he introduced as "[the] active coastal businessman who forms part of the Brautigam Limited enterprise established in Waspan on the Coco River and of the Brautigam-Tom Company, based in Bluefields." A few lines later we learn that the appearance of Harry Brautigam was no coincidence. The Brautigam-Tom Company, founded in 1948, represented the Hamiltons in Nicaragua. We are also informed that, during his short stay in town, Harry Brautigam introduced the millionaire to the highest local political authority, Colonel Julio C. Morales, and to the regional director of the National Bank, Ernesto Somarriba.

Halfway through the interview, Beltrán Bustamante asked Mr Hamilton if he had any advice about the development of other export products that would help the country increase its income. The entrepreneur suggested planting (more) coconuts, rubber trees, and African oil palms, and to reforest with precious lumber varieties. Finally, we are informed that Mr Hamilton planned to return to Bluefields in about six months to greet personally the planters, who, after all, were "the good cooperators in our company and I'd like to know them better." In the second article by our correspondent (27 November 1948), more details of the companies owned and managed by the Brautigams were revealed. Once again, it concerns an interview, this time with Emilio Brautigam, "[a] strong coastal agricultural entrepreneur," who was Harry's father and founder of the family business.

According to Emilio Brautigam, the company's operations in Cabo Gracias a Dios along the Coco River and in the area of Rama were going very well. Not only were the (mestizo) planters in the latter area extending their plantations, in the north the (miskito) farmers produced considerable amounts of rice, which, together with bananas, were bought by the company. Because of the good results, he recommended that the coastal farmers expand the areas devoted to bananas, because "they should feel assured just as our company does."

Here, the entrepreneur referred to relations with the Hamiltons that were still satisfactory. They had even named one of their ships after Emilio. In the last lines of the article, Beltrán Bustamante informs us that Harry Brautigam had become subdirector of the "prestigious commercial enterprise the Bluefields Mercantile Company," another sign of the dynamic spirit of this coastal business family.[24]

These two articles confirm Santiago Rivas' story that, after the war, (at least) two coastal enterprises were operating in the region and maintained contacts with foreign companies. Moreover, they developed other trade activities, such as the commercialization of rice and wholesale trade (the Bluefields Mercantile Company). In fact, the Brautigam-Tom Company functioned as agent for the Hamiltons, a business practice with a long history in the region. The explicit reference to the visits to the director of the bank and political "chief" of the Department suggests that business and politics were closely related in Bluefields and the Coast and that the people involved all seemed to know each other. Moreover, asking for advice indicates an awareness and desire to look for viable economic alternatives given the limitations of the banana industry. Unquestionably, the ideas of "modernization" were circulating on the coast.

In the next two articles (16 April 1949 and 6 August 1949), we learn more about the Brautigam enterprises. In April 1949, Emilio Brautigam planned to make a trip to Jamaica to obtain first-hand information about a newly developed portable sprayer to combat the Sigatoka disease that was once again attacking banana plantations in Central America and the Caribbean. If the sprayer suited him and its price was reasonable, he intended to introduce it to the farmers of the Coco River and Rama area, the main centres of activity of the Brautigam companies as we have seen.

In August, our correspondent conducted another interview with Emilio Brautigam, this time in Puerto Cabezas where both men happened to meet each other. As an introduction to the interview, Beltrán Bustamante presents some information about the entrepreneur's past:

> As everybody knows, don Emilio is a nationalized Nicaraguan who arrived many years ago [in 1882] on the Atlantic Coast with the objective to plough with honour all the possible fields. More than 30 years ago he established a sugar refinery along the Wawashan River, with the idea to provide the whole Atlantic Coast with this indispensable product that was imported from the United States. Due to the rudimentary and incipient nature of agriculture in these days don Emilio failed in his noble purpose, but we saw him making enormous efforts to realize at least part of his objectives.

After a stay in Pearl Lagoon and Bluefields, Emilio Brautigam proved his luck in the northern Atlantic region, doing business in the mining and lumber sectors.[25] This brought him to the small town of Cabo Gracias a Dios, where he began to concentrate on the banana trade in cooperation with miskito planters along the Coco River. In the interview, Emilio confirms that business was still going well, although there were some planters in the Rama area who did not want to sell their fruit to the Brautigam-Tom Company. He was obviously offended by this behaviour, because his company was helping the planters renew production now that the second world war was over. During the war farmers had completely abandoned banana growing. In his own words: "With this attitude they are harming our business that actually operates on a stable and not on a sporadical nor occasional basis."

Hence, business was not without friction and problems. This is affirmed by fragments of an interview with Walter Graham Tom, co-owner of the Brautigam-Tom Company (18 November 1950):

> Our banana company has suffered considerable losses in the banana business, for more than 100,000 cordobas. We have lost part of our profits and capital due to the fact that the company who buys our fruit sent us inspectors who refused thousands of bunches for the most simple reason. We went to reclaim about these enormous and alarming refusals, but they did not grant us one single dime. The only thing that we have obtained, is the promise that the inspectors will be less rigorous. The planter does not know anything about all this. They do not believe what is happening to us. Maybe they would believe it if they could be present here or in Tampa in all confidence where they could be informed about how the market of bananas is right now, when and why the price is so low now that in these months fruits such as apples, peers, grapes, etc., are very abundant in the United States.

Walter Tom continued, telling Beltrán Bustamante that the losses the company had experienced were also due to the competition of other companies that bought bananas. With these companies, they had been unable to reach an agreement that was satisfactory for companies and planters alike. He finally said that, if everyone would cooperate, they could overcome the shocks of the price fluctuations and the planters could work without risk.

Some of these problems were caused by the attack of Sigatoka disease. In a letter directed to the planters, the company tried to explain the difficult situation:

> **TO THE PLANTERS**
>
> The banana industry finds itself in danger and the close future does not look very bright. However, this industry could be saved, but only with the proper cooperation of the Planters.
>
> The fate of the Nicaraguan banana that has obtained in the United States a reputation to be a first class banana, rests today in the hands of the Planters. This means that they should sell us only bananas of good quality and that they should not sell us the ones that are attacked by Sigatoka (also called the burn sickness). The companies with whom we do business are insisting more and more on this and it is, therefore, that if we want to continue in this business and keep on paying you the price that we are actually offering, we also have to demand good fruits that we can export and that satisfy the foreign markets.
>
> Guatemala, Costa Rica and Colombia ship bananas that have an average weight of 55 and 60 pounds per counted bunch, while ours have an average weight of 38 and 40 pounds. These countries are offering their bananas at $0.15 less than the price for which they are sold in the United States. And it is very logical that the banana of major weight, such as the Guatemalan, is the one preferred and not only because of this reason, but also because the transport is less expensive due to the shorter distance that has to be bridged.

Making use of modern techniques, the United Fruit Company has produced bananas with an average weight of 90 pounds a bunch of 9 hands, but the Planters should forget the idea that this company could come to the country to compete in this business.

During the last two years we have maintained a price that has not been equaled in any other Latin American country, which has served to stimulate the Planters in this region to sow a larger amount of fruit. We do not have any intention to reduce the actual price as long as our buyers in the United States keep on paying us the price they actually do. However, at the same time the Planters can not ask us to buy fruits that are sick and not well developed so that we are faced with the enormous amount of refused bananas, as we have had on board of the ship. In order to continue in this business and be fair with the Planters and with ourselves, we are forced to insist on quality and not on quantity....

The Planters along the San Juan River and their neighbours of Costa Rica only receive C$3.50 for each bunch counted and so far the bananas coming from the Castillo and San Juanillo districts have not been better than ours.

Very soon we will see speculators coming to visit you who will spread lies among you, only with the intention to obtain some cargoes when they will find the opportunity to make a good profit. We, on the contrary, have stand firmly side by side to you, even when horizons were not so clear and we did not make any promise that we were not able to fulfill. We know that there are persons who envy us and that would like to cause damage to our business, but we also know that there are many who appreciate us and who esteem the effort that we have made in this business. Moreover, they are ready to support us in confronting the torments of misfortune. We ask these friends to explain this issue to their colleagues who do not know to read and to help them understand what we have exposed in this place....

Brautigam-Tom Company Limited
(*La Información*: 30 July 1949; my translation)

An answer came quickly from a group of organized planters. Not impressed by the arguments used by the company, they offered their own points of view on the question: points that were certainly clear enough! Although we do not have information about how many and which types of farmers supported the reply, this debate is an interesting example of a local political struggle between producers and an enterprise that pretended to operate in defense of the coastal farming population. These pretensions were not appreciated by the planters, as they explained in a letter to the company:

PLANTERS' ASSOCIATION FROM THE SIQUIA DISTRICT TO THE BRAUTIGAM-TOM COMPANY LIMITED

We do not agree very much with what has been written on the single page directed to the "the planters of bananas," for the following reasons:

This is not a help for us, because the help is mutual. We sell our fruits to the Company who makes very good business with buying them from us.

We are the ones who produce the gold, because we hand the export product over to them and they are the only ones that profit from the foreign currency.

We have a strong complaint against the Company. It only accepts selected bananas: nine and big eight ones, that is to say, only nines. This is almost intolerable and a great sacrifice for the planter who has obligations with the National Bank and with the mentioned company itself who leaves the planter behind with all his fruit. There are plantations that only produce bunches of sixes and sevens; and what is this about big eights? This is nothing else than saying that they only receive nines, a thing not seen in any other country.

It is not sure that in Nicaragua the highest price for the fruit is paid, because we know very well that not far away in Panama, a higher price is reached. With the "gold" that we produce, the company brings merchandise which it sells to us at high prices, machetes, for example, cost us 15 cordobas, instead of giving us what we need at a reasonable price with a modest profit. Hence, we are the ones who produce the currency. We can not accept that they sell to the wholesalers the major part of the imported goods bought with our foreign currency, because based on this they make enormous profits with our money.

We observe already that the Company is afraid that competitors will arrive and, therefore, wishes to imbue us with the idea that in this case, however, we will not abandon. But its behaviour should improve if it wants to avoid competitors. How? Well, by receiving our fruits and giving us fair prices for our bananas converted into gold and then into merchandise; of course, it may refuse sick ones, in this it is right.

We need urgently a banana law and that the receivers appoint official inspectors, who will decide whether refusals are fair or not. They should approve that bunches of seven and eight hands and, in certain months, of six will be received, as the Cukra Development Company used to do. That illegal competition should be impeded by prohibition of warnings given on the same days and that prices should be kept stable during one year, when price increases are provoked by the appearance of a competitor.

The Nicaraguan banana is much better than the Jamaican one. On Jamaica they mostly produce bunches of five hands; it is also equal or of better quality than the ones of other countries.

The Company should not discriminate the planters who do business with other companies, with their fruits, boats, or in another way.

Of course the Company is right to say that the government should support to combat the banana diseases and we do not doubt that General Somoza will help us with this and with the implementation of the Banana Law.

We will be on the side of the Brautigam-Tom Company as long as it will abandon its road of own benefit and will practice the wise saying: "I give so that you give me, or better said, eat! and we shall eat."

The Association of Planters
(*La Información*: 13 August 1949; my translation)

Then, in January 1953, we are informed that the Brautigam-Tom enterprise had run almost to the ground. With a sense for drama, Walter Tom explained the situation to our reporter (17 January):

> Our company has struggled titanically and without interruption in order to keep afloat the banana industry in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. We have made enormous economic efforts although many think that we can count on a large capital and that we are making big profits. The reality, however, is different and, therefore, we have decided to return to the old way of operating our business, that is to say, to sell bananas "count bunch," at 80 cents a dollar at the side of the boats that visit the wharf of El Bluff. In this way and with this price we are hardly able to sustain the enterprise while we are waiting for better times.

The future looked so dark that Emilio Brautigam had offered Walter Tom the option to sell his shares of the company if anyone was be interested in taking over the banana business. According to Beltrán Bustamante, who did not hide his sympathy, the coastal entrepreneurs were tired of the daily struggle for survival and the moral sufferings that were the results of the risky banana trade.

Summary: the role of coastal businessmen

After the second world war, when all the transnational companies had abandoned the Atlantic Coast, the banana trade was continued by three coastal companies owned by Jorge Jureidini, Walter Graham Tom, and Emilio Brautigam and sons. These men, with their families and companies, bought bananas in bunches along most of the rivers in the Bluefields area, in the south, and Coco River, in the north, and exported them to the United States.

Although the scale of their operations never reached pre-war levels, for a decade these companies maintained commerce on a level of relative importance. Not only did they export bananas and lumber, they also imported basic and luxury goods, thus maintaining coastal consumption patterns established by the foreign companies and the *comisariatos*. Despite the generally poor economic situation, banana production continued to play a significant role.

After the Standard Fruit Company closed down, the only company that continued buying bananas in the northern region was the Brautigam Company with its head office in the town of Waspan. The company would pay the farmers in the form of coupons that could only be used in the company shops, which exchanged them for cash or products (Helms 1971: 113). In the 1940s and 50s, this company, directed by the brothers Harry and Fred Brautigam, not only bought and exported bananas, but was also involved in trade of rubber, lumber, and basic grains, which were sold in the urban centres of Bluefields, Puerto Cabezas, and the mining towns of Siuna and Bonanza. Through close contacts with the National Bank of Nicaragua, the company was also actively involved in the purchase of loans for the cultivation of bananas in the mentioned zones. As we have seen, the Brautigams maintained export relations with Hamilton Brothers Company of Tampa, Florida.

In the area around Bluefields, the economic and commercial "gap" created by the withdrawal of the transnational companies was filled by the companies of Jorge Jureidini Siady, Walter Graham Tom, and the Brautigams. These companies, although in general on good terms with each other, sometimes got involved in disputes over the purchase of bananas, in their efforts to control as much of the regional market as possible. As was accurately observed by the reporters from *La Información*, these disputes over control of the market were a mere repetition of historical events, when the United Fruit Company tried to establish a monopoly in the Bluefields region and, thus, fix prices to the disadvantage of farmers (*La Información*, 12 July 1946).

The conflict was finally resolved through the intervention of the political "chief" of the Department of Zelaya, Julio C. Morales and President, Lacayo Sacasa: the price of bananas was standardized. An important role in this affair was played by the Cooperative Association of Planters, which was officially registered as a union on 20 August 1946 in the town of Rama. The association had sent a letter to President Sacasa asking him to guarantee a fair price for bananas and prevent a monopoly. Once more, we see that the coastal people were not merely passive social actors overwhelmed by the waves of "modernization."

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Brautigam business was carried on by Harry and his family. In these decades, he remained one of the most important coastal exporters and entrepreneurs, owner of the coconut plantation, El Cocal, and the San Mariano hacienda (see Chapter 3). Moreover, he was actively involved in social and political affairs. For example, in 1965 he became president of the Departmental Board of Social Assistance. In 1969, Harry was the main protagonist in a conflict over a piece of land that belonged to the family, but was selected by the major of the city as the site for the municipal wharf. By that time, there were only three members of the family left, who had succession rights: Harry and Neil Brautigam and Lillian de Brautigam.

Another coastal entrepreneur, Jorge Jureidini Siady, we met in the story of Santiago Rivas. Jorge Jureidini became involved in the banana business in 1929 as a contractor for the American Fruit Company, buying bananas in the area of Prinzapolka and the Río Grande. In 1930, he was negotiating a contract with the United Fruit Company; nothing came of these negotiations so far as we know (see *La Información*, 9 February 1930). In 1931, he became interested in the Water & Electricity Company of Bluefields, at that time in the hands of an US company (*Diario Costeño*, 6 August 1931).

During the second world war, he became a lumber entrepreneur, working for the I.T. Williams & Sons Company in the Pearl Lagoon and Escondido River areas. This company was owned by a local Chinese business man, John Wright. In 1947, Jureidini became owner of the Tropical Sawmill Happy Valley, situated in Bluefields, which processed mahogany, laurel, cedro macho, and other valuable lumber species. The manager of this sawmill was Luciano Benoit, his son-in-law. In 1948, he was employed as a contractor for the Higgins Company of New Orleans, which harvested lumber in the Siquia and Escondido River areas.

In 1958, he moved his lumber operations to Karawala and Sandy Bay Sirpi, where he set up a business with Mr Lampson, forming the Jureidini-Lampson Company Ltd. In 1949, he established his own banana company, buying fruit along the rivers in the Bluefields region. He continued in the banana business until 1953, a year in which the company lost large sums of money. After his death, a son, Jorge Jueridini B., continued the business for a short time but without success. During the 1960s, the same son became president of the *Comisión de Desarrollo de la Costa Atlántica* (CODECA, see below).

In the first part of this section, I have emphasized the active and successful role of some important coastal entrepreneurs in the first post-war decade. Based on their work experiences and established contacts and through the investment of time, sweat, and money they filled the commercial gap left by foreign companies. Additional research should provide us with more details about their stories, which so far have remained outside the writings on coastal history. In the next part, I will pick up the thread of Beltrán Bustamante's articles, moving our focus to the struggles of planters along the Escondido and Kama Rivers, two of the main arteries of the Bluefields hinterland. Here we will find the fragments of other "story books" covered with the dust of oblivion.

Struggling along the rivers

On 22 April 1954, our correspondent informed his readers about a meeting held at the farm of the Acevedo family, located along the banks of the Escondido River. This meeting was organized by Randulfo Solano, an agronomist from Managua, who had come to the area to offer his technical knowledge to the planters and convince them that it was necessary to form a cooperative headed by a board of directors (*una directiva*). The agronomist pointed out the advantages of modern and scientific procedures for sowing bananas, which, although more expensive, would guarantee a longer life to the plants, better yield, and improved protection against diseases such as Sigatoka. He showed the planters a book about the history of this disease and scientific ways to combat it, which clearly impressed Beltrán Bustamante. The farmers agreed to organize another meeting to discuss details of the establishment of a cooperative.

During the months that follow, we do not hear any more about the cooperative. We can assume that it was never formally constituted. Then, on 27 November of the same year another example of "modernization" reached the front page.

A mining magnate, Mr Spencer, owner of the "India" and "Limon" mines in the departments of Leon and Chontales, had launched a plan to build a paper factory on the shore of the Kama River. This initiative raised great expectations among the planters of this area, as our correspondent observed:

> We, the planters of the Kama River believe that if a paper-factory is built here, we will say "goodbye" to the bananas. The attractive salaries that this company will pay will make even us, the owners of banana plantations, look for a job there. This will cause serious problems for the companies that buy

> bananas unless they offer a better price for a bunch of the green gold. This will depend on the buyers in the United States.

On 8 January 1955, Beltrán Bustamante wrote that the preparatory work for the construction of the paper factory was continuing. A group of 20 workers, paid by Mr Spencer, were clearing various tracts of forest. However, so far, the magnate had not given final confirmation of development of the ambitious plan, which kept the local planters, including our reporter, in suspense. Four months later, various rumours circulated in Bluefields that the whole project was cancelled. To find out what was going on, *La Información* sent one of its reporters (no name is mentioned) to the highest authority in the region, Major Ernesto Aparicio Artola, who denied the rumours (2 April 1955). (We now know that, despite this denial, the project was never realized.)

The same day, Beltrán Bustamante wrote an article entitled "Complaints from the planters of our rivers," in which he described the discontent of a group of farmers about the behaviour of the inspectors contracted by the Brautigam-Tom Company. In spite of the company's policy to accept bunches of seven hands and more, these inspectors were refusing fruit, once their small boats were loaded. What was worse, their refusal did not seem to be based on any reasonable grounds, such as bad quality, as the reporter himself went to check. One of the planters remarked that they would not have this kind of trouble and losses if they sold to Jorge Jureidini's company. It was time, so concluded Beltrán his article, that the authorities intervened to protect the interests of the desperate planters who were facing increasing misery along the rivers. His demands in name of the planters remained unanswered.

Four months later (5 August), the same farmers told him that their situation had not improved, and that "since many years they suffered all kinds of calamities rooted in the total neglect by everybody that they confronted." A few months earlier, when the whole region had been affected by floods, the people along all the rivers, except the Kama, had received help. A government program to establish "rural schools" had also bypassed their river.

To do something about this, the farmers of the Kama River region wrote a letter to the Minister of Popular Education asking for the construction of three schools for the more than 200 children in the area "that did not know the difference between a zero and an o." At the same time they authorized Beltrán Bustamante to discuss their problems with Major Artola. They also urged him to ask the coastal deputies, Pedro J. Bustamante and Luciano Benoit, to present this issue to President Somoza "in favour of justice to the inhabitants of the Kama River."

In the second part of his article, Beltrán informs us about another problem that a group of planters from the Kama River faced. This group, headed by the farmer Genaro Artica y Madriz, had received a letter signed by the Cukra Development Company, in which the enterprise ordered them to vacate their rented parcels by 24 December 1954, when their agreements ended. In despair and not knowing where to turn, the farmers asked the reporter for advice. Having read the conditions of the contracts, Beltrán Bustamante told them that legally the company

could ask them to leave. Their only recourse was to ask the manager of the company, Mr Romhild, to be generous and give them time to look for alternatives. It was clear, however, that the farmers found themselves in a situation in which "the water had come to the level of their noses," as the reporter concluded.

Hence, despite various "modernization" programs and plans that reached the Atlantic Coast (mainly on paper), conditions in many parts of the Bluefields hinterland continued to be of a very precarious and uncertain nature. For most men and women, these new initiatives, about which they became informed, for example, through their contacts with correspondents such as Beltrán Bustamante, remained mere promises. Moreover, elements of the past, such as land rental agreements, limited their opportunities. Although they tried several ways of making their needs known, in the end their individual and collective demands, efforts, and struggles (aimed at the defense and improvement of their interests and ways of life) were without success, as far as we know.

Before concluding this section, I should say more about the Cukra Development Company, one of the "business giants" on the coast, as another reporter from *La Información* once described the enterprise.

The "Cukra" was one of the few companies that had survived the most difficult years of the crisis. During the 1940s, it competed for a short time with the enterprises of Tom, Brautigam, and Jureidini in the banana trade.[26] However, in the period from 1945 until the beginning of the 1960s, the company, seen by many coastal men and women as the most outstanding example of a well-organized and prestigious enterprise, concentrated mainly on the cultivation of African oil palm in the area of La Esperanza, Rama.

Started initially as an experiment, this project attracted the attention of the Somozas, who urged its further development. In fact, the present-day oil palm plantations of Kukra Hill, established by the FSLN government after 1979, are built upon this experiment and its evolution over the past decades.

In 1955, the "Cukra" began another project: a cattle hacienda at the site of Loma Mico west of Kukra Hill along the northern bank of the Escondido River. This initiative was a result of an interest in exporting beef for the US market. To improve the quality of the cattle, the company introduced Holstein and other races to the region.

The oil palm project, however, turned out to be a financial disaster due to poor harvests. Results were so bad that, in 1961, a shut down of operations was announced. The manager of the company, Mr Thomason, was the first to declare that the company would recover from its financial troubles as it had done in earlier difficult times. For example, in 1931, the "Cukra" had to give up banana operations on the Punta Gorda, Escondido, and Grande rivers because of the worldwide economic depression and due to plant diseases that spread through the plantations.

The reporter of *La Información* (28 January 1961) who covered the news was obviously reassured by the words of the manager. To convince readers, he informs us that from 1931 until 1961 the Cukra Development Company invested US$14 million in the coast and paid two million cordobas in salaries, which should be a

clear sign of its vitality. However, in 1964 the curtains fell for the company. An end had come to the golden decades in which it had not only offered jobs to the people of Bluefields and guaranteed the import of all kinds of basic and luxury articles, tools, and equipment, but also contributed to the financing of several social and cultural events and the construction of public buildings, among them the baseball stadium in Bluefields (*La Información*, 26 November 1964).

A summary: capital, work, and immigration

After 1945, economic interest in the coast was amplified in a more general desire to integrate "the other side" of Nicaragua into the nation state. This desire was expressed in various speeches by the president (Vilas 1990b). Under the Somozas, Luis (1956-63) and Anastasio Jr (1967-79), in 1963-67 replaced by René Schick and Lorenzo Guerrero, these interests became more diversified and the state became actively involved in "modernization."

On the coast, the Somozas invested capital in production sectors such as lumber, banana, cattle, and fishing; developed the infrastructure; promoted investments of foreign capital (meat and fishing industry); and integrated the culture of the coast into the national state. It is important, however, to emphasize that the ideas underlying this new interest were shared by many *costeños*, who in one way or another had dealings with the Liberal Party or were strongly influenced by the Liberal ideology. In fact, the political biographies of many of the present-day coastal leaders are rooted on the organizational and ideological expressions of liberalism. This is another important issue about which more research should be done.

In a series of articles published in *La Información* in the post-war period, we can observe how "modernization" was appropriated on the coast.[27] For example (15 June 1946):

> The small farmer finds himself alone, without resources. Fighting against an hostile environment where it does not rain 12 months a year, but 13, soils that produce an exorbitant vegetation and where crops die if they do not receive on time the appropriate attention. In this region one can sow during the whole year and obtain good harvests. In the Pacific region agriculture is subject to scarce rains. There, failures are frequent due to the lack of water. Here we find the contrary: one has to defend oneself against the excessive rains. What we need is **Capital, Immigration and Work** [emphasis by the reporter], technical equipment that will help to resolve the problem. Let the law on National Granaries be a reality, in order to defend the small farmer against the rapacity of the trader without scruples.
>
> That a plan for the improvement of agriculture be formulated that would encompass a ten year development period, that agrarian colonies be founded, the state buys workable parcels of land situated along the banks of the great rivers, today in their majority monopolized by the Cukra [Development] Company and landowners that do not even sow one cucumber....

Titles of articles published in the same newspaper during these years expressed similar ideas: "Let us mechanize our fields so that agriculture can revive" (17 June 1950); "That rural workers from Matagalpa may come to work on our fertile fields" (25 June 1955); "That an Agrarian Extension office may be established in Bluefields asks mayor Hodgson" (9 June 1962). Demands were not only formulated in newspapers. In 1950, Waldo Wyman Hooker, regional deputy of the Committee for the Economic Defense of the Department of Zelaya visited Somoza to ask for economic help for the Atlantic region. He was sent back, however, empty handed.

Uneven development and modernization: 1960-1979

In the 1960s, the Somoza government initiated various ambitious colonization programs, both in north and central Zelaya. These programs were based on the Agrarian Reform Law (1963) and supervised by Nicaraguan Agrarian Institute (IAN), a kind of agrarian reform ministry created one year later. The two best-known projects developed in the Atlantic region as part of this program were Tasba Raya (about 400,000 ha) and Nueva Guinea (about 300,000 ha).

However, migration to the coast also took place outside the context of these colonization projects. Data from the agricultural censuses of 1963 and 1971 show us that, in this period, the number of farming enterprises in the Department of Zelaya rose by 54% while the corresponding amount of farm land increased by 172% (Vilas 1990b: 152-153). In the region of Bluefields, the municipality of La Cruz de Río Grande experienced similar or even greater growth in agrarian structure. The municipality of Bluefields, more or less encompassing the hinterland as we have defined it, was less affected by migration. In 1971, there were 1043 registered enterprises (up 17.8%) covering an area of 88,400 manzanas (a 34.6% increase).

In the same pro-development mood, these projects were followed during the 1970s by a large-scale reforestation program (INFONAC-FAO) in the northern Atlantic region. Several training programs for farmers were also set up, in which the "El Recreo" experimental station in Rama played a crucial role. In the area of new developments paths promoted by international agencies, the station started a series of agricultural courses to stimulate cooperation and community organization, the improvement of crops such as rice, corn, beans, and bananas, and livestock management programs.

In 1970, the National Bank of Nicaragua, in cooperation with a consultancy firm from Argentina named Latinconsult, joined these educational efforts by organizing an "advanced course on technical assistance for the coastal cattle farmers" in Bluefields. Among the participants, we find the names of well-known cattle farmers, some of them still alive: Horacio Jackson, Plutarco Espinoza, Elmer Jackson (see Chapter 3), Luis Mena, Eric Halsall. According to the former director of the National Bank's office in Bluefields, J.B. Mejia Silva, these courses were very much needed, because, he observed, average milk production per cow in the area surrounding the city was only 1.4 litres, when it should have been 8 litres given the

environmental conditions of the region. To make his point, he added: "If the population of Bluefields exceeds 16,000 persons and the total milk production is only 800 litres a day, there is a clear shortage of this product" (*La Información*, 17 November 1970). In spite of his words and the seminar, the situation would not improve: in 1992 the local demand for milk is many, many times higher than local supply.

Besides cattle breeding (the activity of a small group), the farmers in the Bluefields hinterland concentrated, in this era, mainly on growing rice, beans, corn, and citricus and on planting new kinds of bananas, such as the "square banana" and the "pilipita," which gradually replaced the sweet bananas used for export (see Chapter 3). The "pilipita" was a variety from Honduras. Its success was due to its resistance to Panama disease and another disease, known as the "moco." Although farmers continued selling part of their harvest, agricultural production became more subsistence oriented.

Before the Managua-Rama road was completed in 1968, farmers came to Bluefields to sell their crops, milk, and meat and to buy products that they did not produce on the farm. The farmers along the Escondido, Siquia, and Rama rivers would pile their produce on the river bank and mark it with a white flag as a signal for the passing boats to stop and pick it up on their way to the Bluefields market.

Whereas, during the time of the banana companies, market relations were maintained indirectly through contact with the companies, these relations became more direct as farmers, themselves, dealt with market vendors and consumers in the city of Bluefields. At the same time, relations were established with private merchants who came to their farms to buy.

After the road to Rama was opened, Bluefields lost part of its market in agricultural products. Grains especially were transported to Managua, which became a more attractive alternative.

During the 60s and 70s, several new investments were made in the region, which, for longer or shorter periods, provided jobs for the population. As we saw in Chapter 6, the Kukra Hill area became one of the core development centres with the sowing of cacao, bananas, and later sugarcane. About the same time, the "Loma Mico" cattle hacienda was taken over by the Somoza family. In Bluefields, various lumber companies began operations, among which were the Bluefields Lumber Company (BLUMCO), a joint-venture between Cuban entrepreneurs and the Somozas, and INFOCASA, a company founded with Spanish capital. Probably the most important effort, however, came from investment in the fishing industry, once more in the form of joint-ventures between the Somoza family and, this time, Cuban and US investors. New companies that emerged were PROMARBLUE (on Corn Island), BOOTH NICARAGUA S.A. (established in 1963 and directed by Mr Ruppel, an entrepreneur from the USA), and PESCANICA. Another plan of the state was to send Dutch immigrants to the region to develop agriculture by providing a good example for the Nicaraguans. (The Dutch never came.) The Somozas, in close cooperation with a company named CASACRUS owned by Jacques Millet, also promoted a project to build a model slaughterhouse in the

harbour of El Bluff. In 1972, they announced a plan for the building of an oil refinery in Monkey Point, south of Bluefields. The refinery was never constructed although, during the 1970s, the Somozas gave out 32 concessions for oil exploration on the Atlantic Coast (Vilas 1990b: 160-161).

Although these companies meant, for many workers, a temporary improvement in their living standard, their activities did not remain uncriticised. Already, in 1969, we find an article in *La Información* in which their predatory nature is questioned, leading to overexploitation of the region's maritime resources. In the same year, another reporter on the newspaper observed that these companies did not pay the usual taxes to INFONAC, although they made large profits that went to directors and owners of the enterprises.

Moreover, the overall economic situation remained difficult. Bluefields continued to depend on the Pacific and neighbouring countries, Costa Rica and Panama, for its food. Basic grains, vegetables, eggs, and chicken came from Managua, bananas from Chinandega, meat from Chontales; items such as soap, shampoo, and construction materials (cement, iron, plywood, nails, zinc) came from the Pacific region. Locally, few goods were produced.

In defense of the Atlantic Coast

Having outlined the economic panorama of the 1960 and 1970s, I will now discuss how, during these decades, new forms of modernization were interpreted on the Atlantic Coast, especially by a small number of coastal politicians in their defense of specific interests in the region. As we will see, during this period, coastal voices became stronger and increasingly critical regarding the initiatives and ideology developed by state institutions.

"The Kennedy plan is not a children's party," was the title of an article written by correspondent Pedro Reyes (*La Información*, 20 September 1961). In it, Reyes stated that the Atlantic Coast should benefit from the "Alliance of Progress," the "development" plan launched by US President Kennedy, because the coastal people had been "so un-selfish, had suffered so much and had been exploited so much." Therefore, the correspondent argued, it was time for justice and compensation for the great contribution the Atlantic Coast had made to the income of the state when its mines were in full operation, its forests destroyed for the export of millions of trees, and the green gold produced along all the rivers. To obtain its fair share of the Kennedy plan, the coastal youth "could nor should not sit down with folded arms in this crucial moment, because they are responsible for the future in the face of history."

During the 1960 and 1970s, the Somoza regime continued to design and execute modernization initiatives, but in this period these were accompanied by a new political discourse. From 1961 on, governments in Latin America elaborated "development" programs and projects within the perspective of the "Alliance for Progress," an initiative of President Kennedy to develop countries on the American continent. This plan, although it was introduced first of all as an economic project, aimed to prevent the spread of communism on the continent set in motion by the

Cuban revolution in 1959 (Bulmer Thomas 1989: 237). The US government was worried about the guerrilla movements in Guatemala and Nicaragua. The constitution of the FSLN in 1961 and its slowly increasing support led to increased military repression by the National Guard, the Somozas' private army.

In Central America, the "Alliance" initiative was closely related to the plan to create a Common Central American Market oriented toward the economic integration of the isthmus. Like the "Alliance," the Common Market was used by the US government(s) to expand its influence on the continent.[28] In Nicaragua, the "Alliance for Progress" financed several projects in the Pacific region, among which was the construction of roads. The Atlantic region, however, was excluded, as *La Información* bitterly informed its readers (24 October 1961). The "Alliance" also pushed Latin American governments to modernize agriculture through agrarian reform programs (Bulmer Thomas 1989: 249). In practice, however, as the case of Nicaragua demonstrates, the reform(s) took place above all by means of colonization programs instead of by expropriation. Hence, the capitalist agricultural export sector remained unaffected.

The newspaper criticised the coastal deputies in the National Assembly for their passive attitude concerning the struggle among the different departments to get a fair share of the funds. The coastal representatives were accused of indifference toward the coastal population that once more was going through a severe economic crisis. The article ended with the following conclusion: "The coastal people and their communities are the most backward people of the world, to begin with Bluefields." From its various articles on the subject of the exclusion of the coast by the "Alliance for Progress," we may conclude that this issue significantly increased the critical attitude of the coastal population.[29]

Perhaps to compensate for the exclusion of the coast, in 1961, President Somoza presented a "Development Plan for the Atlantic Coast," a kind of integrated rural development program that included the provision of credit, the construction of grain silos, roads, and rural schools, colonization projects, and technical assistance. However, very little of this plan was ever realized. The only measures that were effectively executed concerned the economic interests of the Somoza family. For example, in the same year, the president decreed free export of beef through the harbour of El Bluff to facilitate the sale of his own cattle coming from haciendas along the Escondido River (e.g., "Loma Mico").

To give the coastal people, and especially its political leaders, the idea that they were taken seriously, the Rene Schick government created in 1965 the Commission for the Development of the Atlantic Coast (CODECA), as a department of the Ministry of Economy. Although this initiative might be considered a concession to coastal demands for major participation in the formulation and execution of plans for the region, in practice, its members, based in Managua, did not show much interest in making use of this institution to improve the situation. CODECA did not undertake any concrete projects (Vilas 1990b: 144).

The road from Bluefields to the Kukra River

Another project, originally part of Somoza's coastal "Development Plan" of 1961, the construction of a road between Bluefields and the Kukra River, would become a focus of debate between the "Pacific" and the "Atlantic." Many of the elements at stake in the modernization process entered into this affair: the elaboration of plans and programs and the ideology behind these initiatives; politics under Somoza's dictatorship; the role of the coastal representatives in national and regional politics; the reality of never-realized promises and the efforts made by *costeños* to salvage some of the plans. The road was seen by the coastal leaders as a kind of last salvation for coastal agriculture, to assure the Bluefields market access to products from its hinterland, products that usually found their way to the markets of the Pacific.

The construction of the road started in 1965 under the supervision of OPROCO, the Progressive Coastal Organization. In March 1965, OPROCO signed a contract with a local *contratista* to open up a so-called "penetration track" through the forest between Bluefields and the Kukra River. The organization expected to inaugurate the road within 15 days — a goal that turned out to be completely unrealistic. Before following in more detail the problems caused by the construction of the road, I will look at OPROCO, given its important role in local politics in this period and about which little has been published.

OPROCO was founded by a group of young creole men from Bluefields. According to Hugo Sujo, one of its founders, during the early 1960s many creoles became aware that they were being systematically pushed aside in government and other worthwhile political affairs. To do something about this exclusion, they started a campaign to demand creole participation in coastal political life.

These protests were heard by the highest coastal authority at that time, Waldo Hooker, a Liberal and a close friend of President Rene Schick, who, from 1963 to 1967, headed the government in the name of the Somozas. Hooker managed to arrange a meeting with Rene Schick to discuss the demands of the group. However, the group returned to Bluefields without any concrete outcome. This negative response motivated the formal constitution of OPROCO.[30]

In the following years, the group's demands achieved major strength. As one result of this, Hugo Sujo mentioned that, for one term at the beginning of the 1970s, he had been appointed coastal governor. The group did not want to confine itself to politics, however, but do something concrete for the coastal population. According to Sujo, this was how OPROCO chose to support the construction of the Bluefields-Kukra River road:

> We were really dedicated to that road, because it would connect us by land to Managua. That is an ancient dream. A dream of our generation that we still cherish. And, therefore, we, the young professionals of OPROCO, geographers, civil engineers, and others, wrote a scientific work, a book with information about the feasibility, the benefits, etc., of the project.

Hugo Sujo describes the organization as a new awakening of the creole people "for the social and political survival of the creole element." This awakening happened to coincide with events that were taking place in the rest of the world and about which they were well informed. In his words:

> Bluefields used to be flooded with magazines, mainly coming from the USA. You can't imagine one of the magazines from the Unites States that were not circulating in Bluefields: Time, Newsweek, Life, Ebony. Right here in front of the CIDCA-office was an agency owned by Mr Jordan. He used to get subscribers and order the magazines from the States. Plus we listened to the radio stations, the Voice of America, the BBC, the Deutsche Welle, and Hilversum, the station from Holland.

Thus, influenced by the spirit of development, OPROCO actively tried to get aid for the Atlantic region. To obtain resources, by writing articles for *La Información*, for example, its members emphasized the particular identity and specific needs of the coast. In 1979, OPROCO "died a natural death" (in the words of Sujo), as its members feared possible repercussions from the Sandinists because of the association of the organization with the Somoza regime. Several members, however, among whom Hugo Sujo, have remained active in coastal politics.

With this in mind, we return to the Bluefields-Kukra River road. After 15 days, the road was not ready due to technical and financial problems. Therefore, work was postponed until the next dry season. In May 1966, it continued, this time with support from CODECA, which sent two engineers to help solve the problems. As a result of their study, the original route was modified, making work easier and reducing costs. However, actual work was once more postponed until the coming dry season.

One year later, things became worse when it turned out that President Somoza, in a visit to the coast, did not know where Kukra River was located (*La Información*, September 1967). Then, in October 1967 when another opportunity to continue the construction had passed, due to financial problems, OPROCO's request for government support was refused by Somoza. He argued that the project was too expensive. Instead of building the road, he proposed to buy canoes to transport products coming from the river area (*La Información*, 21 October 1967). This was too much for the *costeños* involved in the affair. Pedro Reyes reacted furiously (25 November 1967):

> However, the Delegation [of CODECA] that went to Managua to discuss with the President of the Republic, General A. Somoza Debayle, does not know the place [Kukra River] and its needs, which makes us cry, which causes sadness, deception; because by the meridian light it becomes clear that our beloved Atlantic Coast finds itself without help, yesterday... today and..! No, thousand times no! The *costeños* have to react and understand that conformism is the cornerstone of all calamities from which the Coast suffers; the *costeños* have to understand that while they remain indifferent,

> some benefit from substantial salaries and bargains, but the people whose interests they are supposed to defend will never progress.
>
> Moreover, I tell you that none of these *señores* of the Delegation know Kukra River and its needs, because not one of them could prove to the President that his project of buying canoes to establish traffic between Bluefields and Kukra River does not correspond with the present-day situation, since it would imply returning to the *bató* and the *dori* ["primitive" canoes] that our ancestors used. This is like despising the sowing machine and preferring the *espeque* [sowing stick] that our grandparents used.

In 1970, OPROCO decided to take over the whole Kukra River project with an ambitious plan to realize its dream. Once again financial help from the president was requested. In the same year, Kukra River was declared an "agro-economic zone" by the IAN (compromising almost 62,000 ha), because, given the rumours about the final construction of the road, many Blufileños had invaded the area to obtain so-called "supplementary titles," on various occasions displacing farmer families who had cultivated the land for many years (*La Información*, 30 July 1970).

However, no more than 15 km of road was constructed. Further work was not only hindered by ongoing financial problems, but also by a swampy area that obstructed extension of the road. Then, in 1973, without having carried out the plan to extend the road to Kukra River, OPROCO presented an even more ambitious plan: to connect Kukra River with Nueva Guinea, thus linking the Atlantic with the Pacific coast by land (*La Información*, 30 April 1973). This project, presented in the form of a "book," as Hugo Sujo explained, was never realized, although it remains a dream of many people. In the 1990 election programs of both the FSLN and UNO, the construction of the east-west connection appeared as a future project.

The 1970s: the case of community development

Another expression of the spirit of modernization during the 1970s was the execution of community development projects. Interestingly enough, it was once again the Kukra River area that was to benefit from these initiatives. In 1969, a "Committee for the Development of Kukra River" was formed by 52 families to look for solutions to the problems of the community, especially the ones concerning the question of land. According to its statutes, the committee was summoned to operate in an "altruistic way, without making distinctions according to political, religious or racial colours, everything with a sense of justice."

With the declaration of the area as an "agro-economic development zone" encompassing almost 62,000 ha, the Nicaraguan Agrarian Institute aimed to "correct the deficient and inconvenient structures that hinder development, diversify production, consolidate the small-scale producer's roots to the land, and the enjoyment of tranquillity and stability" (*La Gaceta* cited in *La Información*, 30 July 1970).

In 1973, the Nicaraguan Development Institute (INDE) and the Nicaraguan Foundation for Development (FUNDE), two nongovernmental organizations closely related to AID, initiated a community development project in the area, with

the participation of OPROCO. The project began with a series of courses on issues such as organization and motivation. In 1976, INDE-FUNDE, whose Bluefields section was presided over by Roberto Hodgson, Sr, financed a rice mill and small bodega in Kukra River built by the farmers themselves. During this time, FUNDE organized about 20 seminars on community development and cooperation in the region. However, according to Bluefields-born José Cruz, one of the social promoters in these days, despite the success of the mill and bodega, the problems in the communities were many:

> On my first visit to the hinterland I got the impression that the communities, both Punta Gorda and Kukra River, had a very dispersed character. There were no settlements in these days. The first impression I had concerning the farmers was that they showed little interest in organizing themselves due to bad experiences of the past, principally with the Catholic Church. The Church was used to arrive in the "communities" with a lot of things and give them away. This caused a certain damage, a certain degree of dependency among the peasantry of the region.... When we visited the people, they did not show much willingness to become involved in the work of FUNDE, because I came to them with empty hands. I did not bring them clothes nor milk, only organization and work. Another problem which we confronted was that every zone of the Atlantic Coast, every river had its own exploiter, to use this word. The person who owned the means of transport logically also had more money and they were the ones that contracted the local labour force, while they also resold seeds, sold the rum (*el guarro*) and implemented certain "programs" such as, fishing for river shrimps. This activity offered for some time a reasonable income, but when they stopped buying this product, the farmers were in a worse situation as most of them had abandoned their parcels. In turn, they only received cheap radios that circulated in this epoch or the first gramophone players that were sold; they ate sardines and soda cakes, but their lands were abandoned.

According to José, the system of reselling seeds was extremely unfair. The peasants borrowed one quintal of beans, which, after the harvest, they had to repay with three quintals. Moreover, they depended on the same person for their tools (machetes and files), clothes, and food, because traveling to Bluefields for most of the *campesinos* was a costly and time-consuming affair.

Concerning the *tecnicos* or credit assistants in the bank office in Bluefields who visited the area, José Cruz told us that although the institution was wiling to finance agricultural production, the *tecnicos* used to withhold a portion of the loans by charging farmers for their personal expenses, which were already covered by the bank. Apart from this corrupt practice, he observed that technical assistance delivered by these *tecnicos* was generally poor; no one visited the fields to inspect crops or cattle and to give advice to the producers. Looking back at the work of FUNDE, José Cruz comments:

> The institution was not really interested in a healthy community development program. What they were doing was first of all due to the necessity to present themselves in the eyes of the international agencies [such as USAID and CARE] as actively operating in the Atlantic Coast. A real interest in the life of the farmers did not exist among the higher levels of FUNDE.[31]

In other words, the concrete outcomes of "development" relied on the efforts of the front-line workers and their motivation to do something in close cooperation with the coastal farmers — a situation that parallels present-day forms of intervention in many ways, as we saw in Chapter 2.

With this brief account of how modernization and development efforts reached the hinterland in the 1970s, I have come to the final section of this chapter, in which I will outline the changes that have characterized the post-1979 period as they pertain to the patterns of continuity and discontinuity that I have documented.

Autonomy: a step in the right direction

We have seen, in this chapter, how during the past 100 years the Atlantic region has moved through different stages of a highly erratic and uneven capitalist development process as various boom-and-bust cycles in the different economic sectors followed one after another. Uneven also, in the social sense, as gains and losses were very unequally distributed among the coastal population at large and non-coastal entrepreneurs on one hand and among the different coastal ethnic groups on the other; in a geographic sense, as different zones became more or less and for shorter or longer times the object of expansion of economic enterprise; and, finally, in the sense that it prevented the creation of a well-articulated inter- and intraregional market system of goods and services.

The predatory nature of economic business caused a severe degradation of natural resources, to which a passive or even encouraging attitude of the state and its institutions certainly contributed. This was the case both during the enclave and crisis stages, when the state had very much a patrimonial nature, and during the "modernization" period. Building on the coast's particular colonial history and due to continued isolation, this process of uneven capitalist development reinforced the formation of a strong regional identity, especially among the indigenous and creole population, through which people expressed their differences from the Pacific and its mestizo inhabitants.

During the enclave system, the Bluefields hinterland was transformed into the field of operations of an impressive number of banana and lumber companies. The former produced fruit on their own plantations, but a considerable percentage of production and exports were supplied by creole and mestizo planters who lived dispersed along the many rivers and creeks. The lumber enterprises concentrated their movements in camps located at certain strategic sites that facilitated transport of logs over water.

For three decades, the town of Bluefields prospered, economically and culturally, as the wheels of industry and trade hummed along, almost without interruption. Looking back, the coastal people refer to this period as the "golden years," although we know that the presence of foreign (USA) companies did not have only positive results: the protests and strikes of planters and workers give us an idea of the other side of the coin. We also know that the "original" creole population was removed from its dominant position in the socioeconomic and political hierarchy on the coast. Moreover, people had mixed feelings about the repeated intervention by US marines to "restore order and peace." We still lack detailed information on how coastal people experienced this period, but, based on these pieces, we can conclude that both the enclave concept and the image of the "golden years" are tools of limited value.

The production of lumber and bananas in the hinterland and commerce in town were dramatically affected by the crisis of the 1930s. Unemployment increased and many planters abandoned their farms. In the hinterland, the enclave system as the dominant economic structure rapidly disintegrated. After the second world war, during which the economic crisis was further accentuated, the coastal companies of Walter Tom, Jorge Jureidini, and the Brautigams came to play an important role as they filled this gap.

In the hinterland, farmers returned to the production of bananas for export, an activity that experienced a revival for about a decade. The end of this revival was brought about, on the one hand, by recurring financial and technical problems with which the companies and planters were confronted. On the other hand, only the heirs of the Brautigam family proved capable of continuing business after the founder of the enterprise had died. Further research should give us a better insight into this period of regionally-initiated capitalist development, which has been completely neglected in the study of coastal history.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the farming population in the hinterland increased as displaced mestizo families from the Pacific area settled in the area. At the same time, farming became more diversified. During these decades the hinterland and its inhabitants were confronted, in one way or another, with the "modernization" project that the Somozas had set in motion after 1945. Several plans and programs were launched to modernize coastal agriculture and improve living conditions. However, the farming men and women received few, if any, concrete benefits. Government plans remained promises. In fact, it was only due to the efforts of *costeños* themselves that some "modernization" ideas became reality.

The Sandinist triumph of July 1979 marked the beginning of a new period in Nicaraguan history. However, within the country there were sharp differences in the ways in which people were involved in or affected by the making of this new era. From the 1960s on, the people living in the Pacific region actively participated in the revolutionary process, were affected by it, or were at least informed of it. However, it was only after 1979 that the vast majority of the coastal population, who had not been involved in the struggles that generated the overthrow of the dictatorship, came into direct contact with the Sandinist "project" of national liberalization and social transformation — a project that the new government

intended to expand rapidly and massively to the Atlantic area and that resulted, subsequently, in the outbreak of violent conflicts and a process of reconciliation through the design and implementation of the Autonomy Law.

The point I want to make here is that the evolution of these processes cannot be understood only in the interventionist and reified terms of the revolution on the Atlantic Coast. As I have tried to outline in this chapter, coastal people have a long history of adapting themselves to new circumstances, in which they appropriate ideas and initiatives coming from others, in an ongoing process of trying to make their own history. The post-1979 changes have to be understood in light of this key feature of coastal society and history.

In Parts I and II, we have seen how people from Bluefields and its hinterland have tried to make a living over the past decade, in which many events of major impact have occurred. In one way or another, men, women, and children have been involved in and affected by the political fights, military conflicts, economic crises, and natural disasters that have marked the last 13 years. In 1987, the approval of the Autonomy Law by the National Assembly meant that, for the first time in Nicaraguan history, the particular history, characteristics, and demands of the Atlantic regions and its population were formally recognized by the state. Undoubtedly, this was an important move forward. The election in 1990 of two autonomous regional governments, one residing in Bluefields, the other in Puerto Cabezas, signified another step in the right direction. Most coastal people would agree with this.

The progress made on this level, however, has not solved many of the contradictions and problems rooted in the history of this century and preceding epochs. The majority of the coastal population finds itself once more in poverty and misery. Neither the Sandinist nor the UNO government has been able to transform the economic structures of the coastal economy by creating viable alternatives to benefit the different ethnic groups.

From 1979 until 1990, the Sandinist government continued the "modernization" process of the former decades. In the domain of social welfare, it delegated responsibilities to regional branches of health and education ministries, upsetting the coastal religious institutions (Moravian Church and Catholic Missionary Orders) who for decades had been the sole providers of these services. In the economic domain, it designed and implemented a series of large-scale, state-managed projects based on imported technology and a sharp division of labour and oriented toward the industrialization of natural resources, e.g., coconut, African palm oil, sugarcane, seafood. The mines, ATCHEMCO, and lumber companies, whose production had dropped to almost zero, were nationalized both to stimulate an increase in their operations and to control profits. Due partly to financial and technical problems (obsolete machinery) and partly to centralist management styles, these goals were difficult to realize. Moreover, from the beginning of the 1980s, plans were further distorted by the political-military conflicts in the region. In fact, these conflicts had their roots, to a large extent, in the "modernization" model that the FSLN tried to impose on the coastal region and its population.

The FSLN's initial failure to understand the special character of coastal society and to adjust plans, programs, and projects accordingly, led to the integration of large numbers of *costeños* into the Contras. From 1981 on, the Atlantic region, from its northern border with Honduras to the southern with Costa Rica, became one of the major battlegrounds of the Contra war. As we have seen in Parts I and II, few coastal men, women, and children were not affected by the fights and upheavals.[32] The accumulation of problems and the pressure exercised by the coastal population moved the FSLN government to change its policy toward the region and due to this move the autonomy project was born.

Notes

1. For an account of the coastal history preceding this period, see: Peréz Valle 1978; Smutko 1985; Hale 1987: 33-57; Oertzen et al. 1988; Vilas 1990b: 43-127; and WANI 10, January-June 1990.

2. This division is different from that of Sollis (1990: 481) who considers the enclave period, dominated by US companies, as one single phase stretching from the 1860s until 1979, preceded by the stage of English colonial rule (1687-1860) and followed by Sandinist control. It corresponds approximately with the characterization by Vilas (1990b: 39-41) who analyzes the relations between the Nicaraguan nation-state and the Atlantic Coast distinguishing the period 1930-1945 from the period 1950-1979. During the former, the Somozas built up and expanded their wealth through a patrimonial state, during the latter they started a process of "modernization" of the state and economy.

3. During the 1870s, the San Juan River area was briefly the focus for the extraction of rubber (CIERA 1981: 46-47). During the following decades, however, the area was left untouched by foreign enterprises.

4. Especially between 1910 and 1926, US investments mounted to unknown levels, concentrated in the mining, lumber, and banana sectors. During the same period, US interests (the government and several banks) came to control Nicaragua's public services, such as electricity and mail, customs, the banking system, and foreign debt (Vargas 1989a: 11-13, 1989b).

5. We have to differentiate between these black immigrants and the creole population that was already present on the Atlantic Coast. According to Conzemius (1984 [1932]: 32-33), these creoles were the descendants of slaves whom the English colonizers had brought from Jamaica during the 18th century. They were mostly members of the Moravian Church. The same author observed that the black immigrants came from the Cayman Islands, San Andres, Jamaica, Belize, and some from the French speaking islands of Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. According to Gordon (1987: 139), they were adherents of the Anglican and Baptist denominations. Over the decades, through a process of miscegenation and cultural assimilation, both groups became one, known as creoles.

6. According to Vargas (1989b: 104), the Atlantic region consumed in 1925, 31.67% of all the imported goods in the country, while its population only represented 7% of all Nicaraguans.

7. Travelling to New Orleans in those days was no problem as steamers went up and down on regular voyages. For example, in 1913, the Río Grande Steamship Company advertised its "big and very comfortable steamships" in *El Eco*. The price of a ticket from Bluefields to New Orleans was US$25. Similar offers were made by other companies.

8. In 1928, the National Assembly discussed a law to tax the export of bananas, so far unknown in Nicaragua, which put the country in sharp contrast with others in Central America. The law proposed to levy a two-cent tax on every bunch of bananas. According to *El Correo del Caribe* (29 December 1928), this tax would generate the considerable amount of about US$20,000 a year, which it considered to be of great help for the country in general and the Atlantic region in particular. The newspaper was not sure, however, whether, if the law was passed, this money would indeed be used to benefit the Nicaraguan (coastal) people at large. As we may notice, the questions around which the autonomy process turns in 1992, are not very different from issues raised more than 60 years ago!

9. When, in 1904, the Nicaraguan government conceded this monopoly to the United Fruit Company, the other enterprises immediately reacted. Charles Weinberger, father-in-law of Sam Zemurray, owner of the Cuyamel Fruit Company, headed the companies that decided to fight the "trust" as they labelled United Fruit, forming their own association, the so called "Anti-Trust Company." However, the UFCO successfully defended its interests in a suit in which the "anti-trust" affair was brought to justice (see Karnes 1978).

10. In 1899, the United Fruit Company, founded in March of that same year, bought the Bluefields Steamship Company together with six other companies operating in Central America. In a short time, United Fruit became one of the largest enterprises on the isthmus (Ellis 1983: 41-51; Bulmer Thomas 1989: 40-46). However, although the company's operations were of relative importance in the Bluefields region, compared with the other Central American countries, its interests in the banana production and exports in Nicaragua were insignificant. During the 1920s, it was its long rival, the Standard Fruit Company that occupied the first place in the Nicaraguan banana business, exporting as much as 50% of total national production. Standard's headquarters were in Puerto Cabezas.

11. This is confirmed by the following article from *The Bluefields Weekly*, entitled "Fruit Shipment" (31 of December 1924):

> S.S. Managua of the Cuyamel Fruit Company sailing the 17th inst, carried a cargo of 48,525 stems of bananas resulting 35,764 counts. Six hands bananas were not taken.
>
> The Company's farms produced 4882, 5108, and 5484 of nines, eights, and sevens, respectively.
> Río Grande independents: 5859, 6388, and 7738.
> The Escondido: 4707, 3615, and 4744.
>
> The percentage of classifications being as follows:
> The Company's: 31.55; 33.01; 35.44
> Río Grande independents: 29.31; 31.60; 39.09
> Escondido: 36.02; 27.66; 36.32.

12. In 1925, the population of Bluefields reached a total of about 5000 people, according to data provided by the US consul in the town (cited in Vargas 1989: 104).

13. For a detailed history of the Standard Fruit Company, see Karnes (1978). In 1928, Standard Fruit asked for 2000 *jornaleros* (labourers paid by the day) to work on its plantations (*La Información*, 2 February 1928).

14. For details of these events and their consequences, see: Quijano 1987: 32-85; Vargas 1989: 38-56.

15. Initially, the same reason had moved the US government to support Zelaya and his liberal project of the "modernization" of the Nicaraguan state. These manoeuvres were part of the US government's policy to take over political and economic hegemony on the coast from the English, colonizers of the vast eastern region of the country.

16. These were: José Madríz (1909-10), Luis Mena (1911-12), Alfredo Díaz (1913-17), Emiliano Chamorro (1917-21), Diego Manuel Chamorro (1921-23), Bartolomé Martínez (1923-24) and Carlos Solórzano (1924-25). For details, see: Vargas 1989: 56-78; Quijano 1987: 89-182.

17. On the Atlantic Coast, the crisis also led to open expressions of racism. In a letter published by *La Información* (2 February 1930), a mestizo writer directed himself to the highest regional authority, Gilberto Lacayo B., to protest the arrival in Bluefields of

> an increasing number of foreign blacks, looking for work, whom our governing authorities have let landing without stopping them and this while the Atlantic Coast is going through a bad situation.... On the average these foreign workers only make our already bad situation worse, and this is all the more serious where it black immigration concerns, which does not offer us any racial improvement...

Vilas (1990b: 108-109) and Jenkins (1986: 128) mention that, in 1925 and 1932, respectively, (miskito) workers of the Standard Fruit Company in Puerto Cabezas protested the company's policy to contract black labourers coming from the Caribbean area, especially Jamaica. These examples suggest that due to the severe economic crisis (latent) expressions of racism came rapidly to the fore in coastal society. Whether and how racist attitudes and ideas influenced the practices of everyday life in these days remains a question, as I do not have other information on this issue.

18. For details about Sandino's history, see: Jenkins 1986; Wünderich 1989; and Selser 1990. For a detailed account of his assassination, see: Cuadra 1981.

19. See: Jenkins 1986: 127; Vargas 1989: 232; Vilas 1990b: 104-105.

20. In 1942, the production of rubber from the Atlantic Coast was about 350,000 pounds (data from the National Bank of Nicaragua in Bluefields). In 1943, the amount increased to 4,000,000 pounds (ibid). In 1944, the Hecht, Kahn & Levis Company exported 709,000 pounds.

21. The most notable example of diversification was the large-scale introduction of cotton in the Pacific region. Between 1950 and 1965, cotton rose from 5 to 44% of the total exports of Nicaragua.

22. In 1941, eighty farmers received a loan for the production of rice. In 1942-43, loans for 590 *manzanas* of rice, 219 *manzanas* of corn de *postrera*, and 42.5 *manzanas* of beans were granted. In 1943, the bank in Bluefields provided loans for 560 *manzanas* of rice, 240 *manzanas* of corn, and 30 *mananzas* of beans (source: the National Bank of Nicaragua in Bluefields).

23. In 1941, in spite of the continuing economic crisis, worsened by the war, in the city of Bluefields an astonishing 77 commercial establishments could be found (*La Información*, 27 March 1941). Among these figured the Cukra Development Co.; the Bluefields Mercantile Co.; Wing Sang Co.; the Southern Store; and R. Fransen Co. as the most capital-strong ones. Among the 77, 25 were owned by Chinese (most of the ones strong in capital); among other names that appeared, traders of Palestinian origin, such as Moisés Salomón, Emilio Baharet, Abel Salomón, Manuel Abel Zaharán, Isaac Gesunheit, then Chinese played an important role in local trade. (From the list published in the newspaper, one can conclude that each establishment had to pay a monthly municipality tax, equivalent to 2% of the current capital stock, i.e., the value of the goods. The taxes varied from 1 to 191 cordobas corresponding to a capital of 100 and 90,000 cordobas respectively.)

24. In 1951, Emil Brautigam took over the post of submanager of the Bluefields Mercantile Company in Bluefields, replacing his son Harry who left for the cocopalm hacienda "El Cocal" in San Juan del Norte, which was owned by the family. One year later, Emil became manager of this company while another son, Fernando, was contracted as submanager.

25. In 1910, Emilio Brautigam together with Carl Brundsen founded the Brautigam Company, which was involved in wholesale and retail trade. In 1941, he became manager and stockholder of the Santa Rosa Mine Company Corporation.

26. Going through the CIDCA-Bluefields archives, I found a single page from a United Fruit Company report (signed by J.W. Moore, the manager of the Cukra Development Company and dated 13 October 1951), which gives us some details of the shipments made from Bluefields during this period:

Competitive shipments	Week	Year
Bluefields area	5829	390,798
Vessel name	Steamshipline/Port agent	Cargo
M/V *Berlanga*	American Fruit & SS. co. Jorge Jureidini sailed 10/9/1951 To: Tampa	2253 bunches
M/V *Bison*	American Fruit & SS. Co. Jorge Jureidini sailed 10/11/1951 To: Tampa	4980 bunches
M/V *Gwendolyn*	Hamilton Brothers Brautigam-Tom Co. sailed 10/13/1951 To: Tampa	2448 bunches
M/S *Insco Merchant*	International SS. Co. Weis-Fricker Mah. Co.	still in port to load mahogany

27. At the same time, this gives us a clear indication of the political direction in which the newspaper was moving.

28. For details on the history, goals, results, and problems concerning the Central American Common Market, see: Wheelock 1985: 145-148; Dunkerley 1988: 203-206; Bulmer Thomas 1989: 235-260. Through the Common Market structure a large number of US companies created a foothold in Central America. In Nicaragua, they bought local enterprises, invested in several others in the form of joint-ventures, and signed agreements with local competitors to control the volume of production.

29. Leonardo Cajina dedicated a series of articles to the "Alliance for Progress," published on 30 April, 12 May, 9 and 30 June 1962. Once more the coastal people were demanded to "show your protest, in a civic and pacific manner, to Mister President Somoza Debayle and to demand him the rehabilitation of our Atlantic Coast so that this piece of land will be measured with the same rod (*vara*) as other departments."

30. This explanation contrasts sharply with the paragraph that Vilas dedicates to OPROCO (1990b: 187), where he states that "the ethnic dimension was fundamentally related to the dominant characteristics of the population towards its activity was oriented, more than [based] on the way in which this activity was designed or on the kind of questions on which it was grounded." The involvement of OPROCO in the community development project for the Kukra River area (see below), predominantly a mestizo area, is obviously

another contradiction of Vilas's statement.

31. This interview occurred on 23 February 1991. It forms part of a series that I conducted with men and women involved in the political and social organization of the farming population in the hinterland of Bluefields, before and after 1979.

32. For details of the unfolding of these conflicts, see for example: Dunbar Ortiz 1986: 105-168; Jenkins 1986: 231-444; Hale 1987: 101-128; Gordon 1987: 135-168; Sollis 1990: 497-520; Vilas 1990b: 193-356.

8. "TOMORROW YOU WILL BE DIFFERENT"

Oh beautiful, beautiful home Bluefields,
teardrops are falling for you.
But I know that tomorrow you will be different,
you will be Bluefields again.
Please come back, please come back to Bluefields,
please come back to Bluefields and me...

In this study, my aim has been to document and analyze the variety of ways in which people in Bluefields and its hinterland try to make a living and how their day-to-day efforts to start over again (and again) both inform and are informed by particular political struggles and cultural values. As we have seen in the first two parts of this thesis, the coastal people have had to face, especially during the past decade, exceptionally difficult ecological, political, and economic problems. Today, despite promises made by the UNO and the financial support pledged to Nicaragua by the Bush administration, the situation in which the majority of the people find themselves shows no signs of improvement. According to recent news, more people have lost their jobs, new employment opportunities have not been created, delinquency has increased, and so on.

These problems have rendered their efforts more often a failure than a success. More than once, men, women, and children have had to leave everything behind and rebuild their lives and work from scratch. However, our analysis shows, not only the many merciless, hostile, and unfair aspects of everyday coastal life, it also draws attention to the possibilities of life in this remote, unknown, and forgotten area of Nicaragua. Through our encounters and friendships with the people, young and old, living and working in the hinterland and Bluefields, we became critically aware of this.

Policymaking and politics

The situation caused by the hurricane opened for us a window on the different, and often opposing, interests and opinions among the enterprises in the hinterland, between them and the representatives of government ministries, and among the latter. Furthermore, it drew our attention to the crucial role of the people working for the UNAG. The direct and indirect effects of Joan, including the danger caused by forest fires, presented a serious threat to the survival of the enterprises. Not only were men and women confronted with insecurity over the economic aspects of starting over again, they also had to face attempts by the regional authorities to conceal or minimize the importance of the political side of the situation.

Following in detail a series of encounters in which post-hurricane events and the reconstruction program were discussed, we have seen how divergent interests, perceptions, and clashes were brought to the foreground. However, at the same time, they made us aware of efforts to bridge gaps between the different "parties" involved. The interactions in these face-to-face settings revealed how actors used specific symbolic tools and discourses to present different interpretations of the situation, justify actions, and propose alternatives for the solution of their problems. We observed a marked difference between the farmers on the one hand — in most cases men — and the (sub)directors and other employees of ministries on the other. In the cases of Antonio and Santos of the UNAG, I have analyzed their discourses as being of a more pragmatic nature. For example, Antonio's willingness to let the farmers decide together can be seen as a conscious endeavour to negotiate a shared interpretation of the situation and reach an agreement about the direction to take.

Women and their voices were almost completely absent from these encounters. Considering the key role of women in the organization of production, this absence is all the more striking. As such, the reconstruction program did little to contribute to changing gender roles that inform policymaking processes. By neglecting the specific problems of women, the program further institutionalized access to state resources through men. In practice, government and nongovernment institutions are still run by men who continue to consider themselves responsible for "politics," while they attribute to women the role of being in charge of domestic tasks.

The few women who openly contest this role, individually or collectively (as in the cases of Teresa and Elba, for example) are forced to negotiate continuously with their husbands and with the representatives of the state or the UNAG. In this sense women on the coast face a much more difficult situation than women in many areas of the Pacific region, as physical conditions and geography form serious obstacles for women to share experiences and develop a common strategy to improve their situation.

I have argued for seeing these encounters as part of the complex and conflictive process of formation of a new and, with the FSLN, revolutionary government, state structures, and organizations whose goals are to defend the interests of farmers and workers. In Chapter 7, we saw that, before 1979, the coastal farmers remained almost completely outside the sphere of state affairs. After 1979, several "projects" were developed by state institutions and the UNAG to improve this situation. The encounters form part of this process, but in a non-linear and non-deterministic way. Many aspects of the assumed logic of the reactivation and reconstruction program, including the no-burning decree, were disputed by the farmers. These protests could be seen as a form of collective resistance to the forces of regulation and institutionalization exercised by the regional government and the emergency committee. It is in this way that politics and political struggles stand at the heart of policymaking.

The role of the delegates of the UNAG in the post-hurricane reconstruction and reactivation process has shown us the complexity of these processes. In a flexible way, they continuously adjusted to the new circumstances. This was done intentionally, as only in a few cases, were there no alternatives available.

Pragmatically, they moved through the various organizational and political bottlenecks, facing the regional government's (and FSLN's) expectations, on the one hand, and the demands of the *campesinos*, on the other, with their own interests, ideas, and aspirations sandwiched between. We can only understand their roles by taking into account the regional configuration of political power. The UNAG delegates did their best to avoid open conflicts with the other institutions. Here, we have seen the importance of looking past the practice and ideology of *bajar lineas*, which is said to be so characteristic of the functioning of the FSLN party.

As a second case of policymaking at regional level, I documented how the price regulation commission (Chapter 4) became absorbed into the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Bluefields. The price issue was used by the different actors to defend economic and political interests, voice their ideas, and legitimize values, norms, and rules of the game. The debate about prices and the related question of free trade became a means to define or redefine the configuration of political power and authority at the regional level. The specific outcomes of this were the result of a dialectic interplay between forces at work in the country at large and forces operating locally. This time, the price conflict formed, for the regional UNO government, a means to react directly and impose on economic life in Bluefields; hence, the importance of a political analysis of economic processes, such as commoditization, price regulation, and the workings of the market.

It was only after the commission was created and the measure announced that its members started to define concrete norms and rules. The policymaking process that followed had a very pragmatic and incoherent nature, in which the regional policymakers were continuously obliged to adapt to new situations created by the often unforeseen (not to say, undesired) actions and reactions of consumers, merchants, and price inspectors. The degree of free-ness of the proclaimed "free trade" decreased significantly in this process, while contradictions in discourse and action increased. Our analysis reveals the fundamental contradiction underlying the attempt to plan a so-called free market.

In both cases, policy has passed through a series of stages in which outcomes and meanings have been shaped and reshaped in different contexts. Concerning the reconstruction program, time and space boundaries have remained very fluid. Although food aid ceased at a specific time, this did not mean that all the problems related to production and consumption were resolved. For months, several of the portable sawmills stood unused in front of the IDSIM office. When we left Bluefields in October 1991, they were still standing there. Had the project come to an end? It is hard to believe that it did, given the fact that many of the families in the area affected by Joan, especially in the hinterland, had not yet rebuilt their homes.

During the dry season of 1992 (February-May), burning was once again prohibited by the regional authorities. In spite of this, for weeks fires were signalled almost everywhere in the hinterland. IRENA did not act nor react.

Dealing with uncertainties

The labour story of Santiago Rivas (Chapter 6) has given us a clear picture of the unpredictable nature of what I have called the "pull" forces of the regional economy. Capitalist companies left when resources became scarce, margins of profit too narrow, or the political situation too uncertain in the eyes of owners and managers. However, to fully understand his career, we also have to look at the influence of "push" factors, which at certain times and places made him move to try his luck elsewhere. It is at the crossroads of these two forces that his history has obtained its particular and probably unique shape.

We have seen how, over time, social contacts have played a key role in paving the road of his work experience. Within the bounds of friendship, family, and professional contacts, is the image that Santiago evokes of himself as a self-made man who does not depend on anybody and does not owe anyone even a dime. This web of relations, certainly of a non-commoditized character, forms a basic part of the social structure of coastal society. The strength of this web defines, to a large degree, how successful people are at making a living and surviving on the coast. Success here does not mean maximizing income or profits, but doing one's best to satisfy concrete needs and guarantee a basic minimum level of stability: not an easy task, as we have seen.

I have used the labour history of Santiago Rivas to open the route for the silent voices, for the thousand-and-one coastal stories that still need to be recorded and analyzed. In Chapter 7, my goal was to make a contribution to such a new or additional understanding of regional history, in which we try to find out how the individual **and** collective efforts of men and women to solve livelihood problems both structure and are structured by supraregional forces. Here, I have stressed looking past the narrow economic nature of the enclave concept, which tends to conceal its diverse character and does not tell us anything about how the people experienced this period. I have also raised the question of how coastal entrepreneurs played an important role in the regional economy during the first decade after the second world war. A complete account of the history of their families and companies remains to be written. Although the underdevelopment of the material forces of production made continuing capitalist enterprise after many of the transnational companies had left difficult, it did not make it impossible.

Furthermore, I have stressed the intent of coastal people to appropriate, shape, and reshape both discursive and organizational elements of the modernization "project." This brings us to the crucial questions of (the history of) **regional** politics and policymaking, the emergence of a regional political elite, and its ties with the Somozas and their political party, the Nationalist Liberal Party (PLN). These issues, I believe, provide enough material for a separate study. Finally, we have seen how farmers continued trying to make a living in the hinterland and adjusting to new circumstances. In this sense, I hope that the two chapters of Part III stimulate further research on issues that so far have remained in the dark.

Heterogeneity: a dominant feature

The three case studies of rural enterprises (Chapter 3) show both the diversity and fragility of production practices in the Bluefields hinterland. The isolation of the Atlantic Coast, the complex ecology of the (damaged) tropical rainforest, the Contra war, hurricane Joan, and the economic crisis have led to a seemingly never ending series of discontinuities in the lives of the people. Confronted with these ruptures, the members of these units aimed above all to optimize available resources to guarantee the basic needs of the household **and** to provide a (minimum) monetary income. As we have seen, the degree to which these objectives are achieved vary significantly among enterprises. Moreover, within the units, conflicts and divisions may result from different interests and ideas.

The slash-and-burn production method in the hinterlands is closely tied to the regional market and the wider social formation, although the ecological, geographic, and infrastructural conditions of the area make the establishment and maintenance of these ties a problem. All units are tied to the market, but for many, market relations are of a very irregular and uncertain nature. At the same time, forms of appropriation vary significantly as farmers exercise more or less control over transactions.

In the case of Bernardo and Teresa, this control was almost absent: they had to accept the prices set by local merchants and marketers. This was less so in the case of Lorenza and José, who sold directly to consumers. They had more flexibility in their commercial transactions. Sometimes, products were exchanged for other goods instead of money.

We have seen that units located relatively close to town had an advantage over those situated at the centre or far borders of the hinterland. This is one of the factors that contributes to differentiation among the enterprises. At the level of the enterprise/household, differentiation becomes affected by gender roles and divisions. In the hinterland, men, in general, control what, when, and to whom products are sold. They also determine how the money obtained in these transactions is used. However, as Elba Chow's stories and experiences demonstrate, women more and more openly criticise these inequalities and develop ways to change attitudes and ideas of husbands or partners.

In Chapter 5, I argued that the heterogeneity of petty commodity enterprise, once again seen within the specific local boundaries of the possible and impossible, is probably the most particular feature of the Bluefields' world of trade that I have documented and analyzed. Through an identification of the different and continuously changing sets of commoditized and non-commoditized relations and networks, cultural devices, and everyday forms of political struggle that men and women use to operate their businesses, we can conclude that we have to move beyond simple, essentialist, and dualistic types of analysis in terms of legal/illegal activities, formal/informal sectors or non-capitalist/capitalist modes of production.

On one hand, the relatively capital-intensive enterprises of Sun Wang Ling and Antonia Mendoza, which tend to be rather "centralized" with commercial contacts that encompass regional and supraregional levels, only function because of the use

of various crucial non-commoditized ties. In the case of Sun Wang Ling, his trade network even surpasses the national borders. On the other hand, the variety of units, which constantly face the lower limits of subsistence where levels of accumulation are insignificant or absent, not only rely on non-commoditized relations to keep their heads above the water, but at the same time remain intensively attached to commodity exchange. Hence, both kinds of relations are part of the networks that individuals build to develop their businesses.

The stories of many women merchants suggest that getting into business is not just a means to provide three meals a day. For them, trading has become a way to create space, **both** literally and figuratively, to defend other than mere economic interests. They have given and continue to give form to distinctive trading styles that are key elements in the social and cultural construction of the local world of trade. The interrelations of these cultural, political, and economic factors explain the expansion and continuity of petty commodity business.

The cases of the rural, urban, and rural-urban enterprises can only be understood if we follow in detail the trajectories of these units and their members. What strikes us the most, when looking at the up and downs of their development paths, is the heavy reliance on very diverse and continuously changing sets of non-commoditized relations to obtain access to personnel and material resources — a feature we also detected in the labour story of Santiago Rivas. This characteristic, I believe, has been and continues to be a constitutive element of the coastal economy.

An understanding of these relations should, therefore, be an integral part of any study of the coastal political economy and not be treated as a residual phenomenon or as a sign of the backwardness, weakness, or underdevelopment of coastal society. Looking at the cases in more detail, we observe that, although they were all confronted with the need to overcome the uncertainties and instabilities that (have) come with commoditized relations of production and distribution, there is no single logic that determines the particular reproduction strategy or pattern of each unit. As Carol Smith has convincingly stated (1984: 211), there is, therefore, no need to argue about the essence of some kind of classic or ideal mode/form of production (e.g., capitalism, whether uneven or not).

Such an approach contributes to a better understanding of the present day influence of capitalism in the urban and rural contexts of Bluefields and its hinterland: more precisely, of the heterogeneity of social practices and relations that constitute it. It shows us how some individuals and social units, be they households or enterprises, "capital-ise" more than others, i.e., how they use gender and other relations, skills, and cultural values to produce surplus value and accumulate capital. Or, lacking the vital resources to do so, they remain at subsistence level or fall below this line.

This highlights the forms in which these are produced and grow (or not), taking into account the changing structural features of their enterprises. It demonstrates how each form affects the capital-ising efforts of other social actors who may be nearby and visible, nearby and "invisible," far away and visible, or far away and "invisible." Such an analysis draws attention to the attempts of people to make their

own history, despite encroaching powers that seriously limit their opportunities. Moreover, it points to processes of differentiation **between** these units and **within** them. Finally, it reveals how the people involved themselves experience the many facets of doing business, more or less successfully, and facing problems that are extremely difficult.

Heterogeneity then results, to a large extent, from struggles over material goods and cultural values, in which people become involved, individually and collectively. These struggles are informed by given material conditions and by class, ethnicity, age, and gender as our stories demonstrate. To understand the specific influence of each of these factors, we have to analyze the precise composition of the basic operational units and how this composition may change over time. Narrowing the analysis down to modes of production (capitalist versus non-capitalist) or sectors (formal versus non-formal) tends systematically to leave these questions unanswered. Agreements about the use of labour for the enterprise, the pooling of resources, and the sharing of ideas are not a priori facts, but the results of often difficult to discern discussions, negotiations, and conflicts between parents and children, and between husband and wife. The aims of individuals may clash with what other members of the household perceive as the common interests of the unit. The tears of Angela and Guillermo's daughter (Chapter 3) remind us of this.

A final note on the research journey

The uncertainties and difficulties that the people from the Atlantic Coast face and the ways in which they try to deal with them have formed a leading motive in this thesis. Hurricane Joan, the aftermath of the Contra war, the change of government, and the enduring economic crisis force men and women to live from one day to the next and make ad hoc decisions and initiatives to guarantee their survival.

The direction in which the research project has moved and the dynamic that has guided our efforts reflect this reality. Almost from the very beginning, we became entangled in the forces at work and, finding ourselves in this situation, we had to decide whether to adjust to the changing circumstances. To do so was not easy. Often we became stressed, sometimes very discouraged, as one might expect. However, at the same time, it pushed us to go ahead. Taking the people around us as an example, we decided to try to make the best of the situation.

What this meant during the three years of research was to approach our work with an open mind and a flexible attitude, practically, methodologically, and theoretically. It also meant the maintenance of fluid communication between and critical reflection among the members of the research team. This was probably the most difficult task of all. Fortunately, it turned out to be also one of the most enriching experiences. As Long (1992) argued recently, this makes us rethink in more detail the relations between field research, theory building, and the development process:

> We argue that an actor-oriented perspective entails recognizing the "multiple realities" and diverse social practices of various actors, and requires working out methodologically how to come to grips with these different and often incompatible social worlds. This we see as central to an understanding of development processes (after all, social change involves the struggle between different social interests and the intersection of life-worlds), and to improving research practice in general. Also implied is a greater sensitivity to the process by which the researcher him/herself enters the life-worlds of the researched (and vice versa) and thus more reflexive types of ethnography.

I hope that our study contributes both to this rethinking and to the efforts of coastal people to realize that tomorrow their life will be different, brighter, and better.

GLOSSARY

afligido/a	sad
agarrar patio	to establish oneself, to build up a network
ambulante	itinerant trader
amiguismo	faked friendship
andar en el monte	to work in the fields or the forest
animales del monte	wildlife
apoyo reembolso	support to banana tree
asamblea	meeting, assembly
asentamiento	settlement
Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC)	Association of rural workers
ayudante	helper
bajar líneas	to send orders from higher to lower level
Banco Nacional de Desarrollo (BND)	National development bank
barrio	neighbourhood
batería	(packing) plant
bisne	business
bisnear	doing business
brigadistas	member of a brigade
buhonero	pedler, ambulant trader
capataz	foreman, boss
campesino/a	farmer, peasant
campo	field, land
canasta básica	basic (consumption) basket
caramanchelas	small, improvised stall/stand
carreta	cart
carretonero	owner of a cart
carril	lane (in a forest)
casa de gobierno	government house/building
cayuco	a kind of canoe
chamba	small job
chambeador	a person looking for a small job
chanchero	"old" cordoba

chapea	weed
chapiollo	messy, chaotic
chiclero	a person who collects a resin to make chewing gum
Central Sandinista de Trabajadores (CST)	Sandinist labour union
Centro de Investigaciones de Reforma Agraria (CIERA)	Research centre for agrarian reform
Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica (CIDCA)	Research and documentation centre of the Atlantic Coast
cochinada	something of little value
comisariato	commissary store
Comité Evangélico pro Ayuda y Desarrollo (CEPAD)	Evangelic committee for help and development
concertación	harmonization, an attempt to come to a political agreement
compactación	reduction of the state
compadrazgo	godparenthood
Compañia Maderera de Bluefields (COMABLUSA)	Bluefields lumber company
Comisión de Desarrollo para la Costa Atlántica (CODECA)	Commission for the development of the Atlantic Coast
comunidad	community
contratista	contractor
Corporación Forestal del Pueblo (CORFOP)	people's forestry corporation
crudo	raw, without burning
desconsolado/a	disappointed
desfase	delay
directiva	(board of) directors
dorí	a small canoe
Empresa Cooperative de Productos Agropecuarios (ECODEPA)	Cooperative enterprise for agricultural products
Empresa Nacional de Alimentos Básicos (ENABAS)	National enterprise of basic food products
espeque	sowing stick
evangélico/a	a person who is evangelic
expendio	food distribution shop
fracaso	failure
Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN)	Sandinist front for national liberation
frontera agrícola	agricultural frontier

Fundación Nicaragüense para el Desarrollo (FUNDE)	Nicaraguan foundation for development
galerón	poultry-house
gallo pinto	rice and beans
gerente	manager, boss
gestionar	try to arrange
gobernar desde abajo	govern from below
guarro	liquor, rum
hermano	brother
hermana	sister
hogar	home, house
inquietudes	worries, problems
Instituto Agrario Nicaragüense (IAN)	Nicaraguan agrarian institute
Instituto Nicaragüense de Desarrollo (INDE)	Nicaraguan development institute
Instituto de Desarrollo de la Iglesia Morava (IDSIM)	Development institute of the Moravian church
Instituto Histórico Centroamericano (IHCA)	Central American historical institute
Instituto Nacional de Fomento (INFONAC)	National promotion institute
Instituto Nicaragüense de Desarrollo para las Regiones Autónomas (INDERA)	Nicaraguan development institute for the autonomous regions
Instituto Nicaragüense de la Pesca (INPESCA)	Nicaraguan fishery institute
Instituto Nicaragüense de Recursos Naturales y del Medio Ambiente (IRENA)	Nicaraguan institute of natural resources and the environment
Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social y Bienestar (INSSBI)	Nicaraguan institute of social security and welfare
jornalero/a	a day worker
limpio	clean, correct
liquidación	payment
listo/a	ready, lost, smart
los hombres del monte	the Contras
los primos	the Contras
los turcos	Turks, Arabs
machete	long knife
machetero/a	a person who works with a machete
mandador	foreman, boss
mano vuelta	a system of mutual help

manzana	0.7 hectare
marina	job to bring food by boat
marinero	sailer, someone who brings food by boat
mayorista	wholesaler
mentira	a lie, impossible
mercadería en general	general merchandise
Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería (MAG)	Ministry of agriculture and livestock
Ministerio de Comercio Interior (MICOIN)	Ministery of internal trade
Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria (MIDINRA)	Ministry of agriculture and agrarian reform
minorista	retailer
Movimiento Unitario Revolucionario (MUR)	Revolutionary unitarian movement
mozo	salaried worker
nuevo amanecer	new dawn
Organización Progresista Costeña (OPROCO)	Progressive coastal organization
oro verde	green gold: bananas
pañas (from *españoles*)	Spaniards
Partido Liberal Nacionalista	Nationalist liberal party
Partido Social Christiano (PSC)	Social-christian party
patrón	boss, landlord
plaza	square, market-place
pleitista	eager to dispute/fight
postrera	second agricultural cycle
potrero	pasture
presidente	president
primera	first agricultural cycle
productores	producers, farmers
pulpería	small shop
pulpero/a	shop-owner
quema	burn, banana disease
quincena	fifteen days (payment)
rancho	ranch, farm-house
reales	dimes, money
responsables	responsibles, leaders
saneamiento	healing, cutting of dead banana leaves
seguro	security
sociedad	society, partnership
taco	snack

tarea	(labour) task
tecnico	technician, employee
terrenos nacionales	national lands
tienda campesina	farmer shop
tierra	land, soil
tierra pesada	"heavy", uncultivated land
trueque	kind of exchange without money
Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (UNAG)	National farmers union
Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO)	National opposition union
vago/a	vagabond
vara	rod
ventecita	small shop
YATAMA	political organization of Miskitos

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SAMENVATTING

In dit proefschrift heb ik uiteen gezet hoe de bevolking van de Nicaraguaanse Atlantische kust, met name de bewoners van de stad Bluefields en de zone die haar omringt, zich gedurende de afgelopen tien jaar genoodzaakt hebben gezien om steeds weer opnieuw hun werk en leven van de grond af aan op te bouwen. Met andere woorden, om steeds maar weer opnieuw te beginnen. Ik heb daarbij speciale aandacht besteed aan de manieren waarop hun pogingen om dit te bewerkstelligen beinvloed zijn door en tegelijkertijd invloed uitoefenen op specifieke culturele waarden, gender-verhoudingen en vormen van politieke organisatie en strijd. Sinds 1979 hebben de Atlantische kustbewoners een aantal extreem moeilijke problemen van ecologische, politiek-militaire en ekonomische aard moeten overkomen. Vandaag de dag, ondanks de mooie beloften van de in 1990 aangetreden UNO-regering en ondanks de beloofde financiële steun van de regering Bush, is de situatie er niet veel rooskleuriger op geworden. Integendeel, volgens de laatste berichten nemen problemen zoals werkeloosheid, armoede en delinquentie alleen maar toe.

In deze studie hebben we gezien hoe vrouwen, mannen en kinderen verschillende keren hun land, woning, onderneming, vee en andere schaarse bezittingen hebben moeten achterlaten vanwege de contra-oorlog. Een triest dieptepunt van ellende en verdriet werd vervolgens veroorzaakt door de orkaan "Joan" die in oktober 1988 over Nicaragua raasde. "Joan" liet weinig heel van de stad Bluefields en haar achterland. De oorlog en de orkaan, en de negatieve gevolgen van de ekonomische crisis, maken het opnieuw beginnen voor de meeste mensen een uiterst hachelijke onderneming. Desondanks slagen velen erin om er het beste van te maken. Onze kontakten en vrienschap met de mensen opgebouwd gedurende meer dan drie jaar veldwerk, zo goed mogelijk beschreven in de drie delen van dit proefschrift, vormen daarvoor het beste bewijs.

Deel 1 bevat een beschrijving en analyse van de gevarieerde wijzen waarop de rurale ondernemingen in de zone rondom Bluefields vorm geven aan het produktie en reproduktie proces, zowel voor als na de orkaan "Joan". In Deel 2 verplaatsen we onze aandacht naar de roerige wereld van de (kleinschalige) handel in Bluefields, de relaties tussen de stad en haar achterland en de bemoeienissen van de regionale regering met het commerciele gebeuren. Op basis van een actor-gericht sociologisch perspektief, plaatsen we in beide delen onze bevindingen binnen het kader van aktuele theoretische discussies betreffende de sociale betekenis van beleid enerzijds en commoditiserings-processen anderzijds. Waar relevant refereren we hierbij ook aan studies verricht in Nicaragua. Een kritische bijdrage aan deze debatten is het onderwerp van hoofdstuk 1. In Deel 3 tenslotte,

plaatsen we de veranderingen van de laatste tien jaar in een langer tijdskader. In dit deel richt onze aandacht zich op de geschiedenis van de Atlantische Kust en de Bluefields zone in het speciaal.

Beleidsvorming en politieke strijd

In hoofdstuk 2 hebben we gezien hoe de zeer kritieke situatie veroorzaakt door orkaan "Joan" de verschillende en vaak tegenovergestelde belangen en gezichtspunten onder de boerenbevolking van de Bluefields-zone enerzijds en tussen de boerenbevolking en de vertegenwoordigers van de overheid anderzijds, op een scherpe wijze aan het licht bracht. Tegelijkertijd vestigde het onze aandacht op de sleutelrol die de boerenvakbond UNAG speelt in de uitvoering van landbouw en ontwikkelings-beleid in de regio. De orkaan veroorzaakte niet alleen ekonomische problemen. De specifieke aanwending van schaarse middelen en het nemen van bepaalde besluiten als onderdeel van het rekonstruktie plan werden door de betrokken boerenbevolking aangevochten. Hoewel de emergentie-commissie haar best deed om de politieke inslag van het rekonstruktie-plan vis-a-vis de boerenbevoling van de Bluefields-zone te minimaliseren, maakten de boeren duidelijk dat het proces van "opnieuw beginnen" ook politiek van aard was.

De karakteristieken van dit proces heb ik beschreven en geanalyseerd middels een serie ontmoetingen tussen de boeren bevolking en vertegenwoordigers van de regionale overheid en de UNAG. De boeren -in bijna alle gevallen merendeels mannen-, zetten tijdens deze ontmoetingen hun belangen en ideeën uiteen referend aan korte termijn benodigdheden, praktische aspekten van landbouwbeoefening en het ontbreken van (voldoende) overheidssteun. De vertegenwoordigers van de twee belangrijkste betrokken ministeries, MIDINRA en IRENA, argumenteerden daarentegen vooral op basis van lange termijn belangen, theoretisch-wetenschappelijke overwegingen en de noodzaak om te denken aan de belangen van de regio (de regionale regering en bevolking in het algemeen). De twee woordvoerders van de UNAG vielen op door hun meer pragmatische houding en hun pogingen om tot een door alle betrokken partijen gedeelde oplossing te komen. Ze deden daarbij hun best om de belangen en gezichtspunten van de boeren bevolking, de UNAG als vakbond en als bondgenoot van het FSLN, en hun persoonlijke belangen (vooral: politieke carrière), te kombineren.

Vrouwen werden in deze ontmoetingen niet of nauwelijks gehoord noch serieus genomen wat, gegeven hun fundamentele bijdrage aan de landbouw in de zone, opmerkelijk en betreurenswaardig is. De uitvoering van het rekonstruktie plan droeg derhalve weining bij aan een verandering van de sexe-rollen in beleidsvorming en uitvoeringsprocessen in de Atlantische Kust. Vrouwen worden in de realisering van deze taken nog altijd als ondergeschikt beschouwd, zowel in overheids-als niet-overheids-organisaties. De enkele vrouwen die deze verhoudingen openlijk aanvechten en trachten te veranderen, zien zich gedwongen om keer op keer te onderhandelen met mannen (echtgenoot/compagnon en vertegenwoordigers van de overheid/UNAG/andere organisaties) om toegang te verkrijgen tot schaarse middelen en besluitvormings-organen.

Als een tweede case-studie van beleidsvorming en politieke strijd op lokaal nivo hebben we gekeken naar de door de regionale UNO-regering gevormde en uiteindelijk opgeheven prijcontrole-commissie (hoofdstuk 4). Ook in dit geval hebben we gezien hoe een beleidskwestie, in dit geval de regulering van prijzen van basis-produkten, door de verschillende betrokken "partijen" aangegrepen werd om specifieke ekonomische en politieke belangen en gezichtspunten te verdedigen. De in naam autonome regionale UNO-regering kreëerde de commissie in een poging om haar geschaadde authoriteit te herstellen. Gedurende de zes maanden dat de commissie bestond, kwam van deze poging echter weinig terecht. Konflikten met de gemeente(raad) en met markt-handelaren en winkeliers, interne verdeeldheid, gebrek aan bestuurs-ervaring en organisatorische problemen, bepaalde vormen van vriendjes-politiek en uiterst inconsistente en zelfs tegenstrijdige ideeën omtrent de regulering van de handel en de markt, droegen hiertoe bij. In dit hoofdstuk heb ik beschreven hoe in de opeenvolgende etappes van het uitvoeringsproces de leden van commissie en regionale regering als het ware achter de feiten aanholden zonder ook maar een moment kontrolle op de situatie (en de prijzen) uit te oefenen. Ze zagen zich daarbij steeds opnieuw genoodzaakt om zich aan te passen aan de nieuwe ekonomische en politieke omstandigheden op lokaal en supra-lokaal nivo.

In beide hoofdstukken (2 en 4) is duidelijk geworden dat in het geval van de Atlantische Kust de sociale betekenis van beleid op zeer specifieke wijze gevormd en her-gevormd wordt. Het is daarom van belang om beleidsprocessen en gevolgen in ruimte en tijd nauwgezet en gedurende een zo lang mogelijke periode te volgen en oog te hebben voor de politieke strijd betreffende belangen, interpretaties en regels van het (politieke) spel die er deel van vormen.

Oog in oog met onzekerheid; en een nieuwe kijk op de regionale geschiedenis

In de verschillende hoofdstukken hebben we gezien hoe de bevolking van de Atlantische Kust het hoofd tracht te bieden aan situaties van ekonomische en politieke onzekerheid. Dit fundamentele kenmerk van de Atlantische Kust samenleving komt het meest duidelijk naar voren in de veelzijdige en bewogen arbeids-carrière van Santiago Rivas (hoofdstuk 6). Het komen en gaan van (buitendlandse) groot-schalige kapitalistische (bosbouw) ondernemingen enerzijds en familie-, vriendschaps,- en werk-kontakten in kombinatie met persoonlijke beweegredenen van Santiago anderzijds, zijn de belangrijkste faktoren die zijn carrière vorm hebben gegeven. Opvallend en van belang hierbij is dat bijna al deze kontakten een niet-gecommoditiseerd karakter hebben. Zoals in de uiteengezette case-studies van de hoofdstukken 3 en 5, vormen deze niet-gecommoditiseerde relaties één van de centrale manieren waarop de bewoners van de Atlantische Kust de kontinue onzekerheid het hoofd proberen te bieden.

Tegelijkertijd heb ik Santiago Rivas' arbeids-carrière gepresenteerd als een bijdrage aan een nieuwe kijk op de geschiedenis van de Atlantische regio en de Bluefields zone in het bijzonder. Een dergelijke analyse richt niet alleen de aandacht op de invloed van ekonomische en politieke macro-faktoren, maar ook op

de vaak zeer diverse individuele en kollektieve pogingen van mannen en vrouwen om hun leven in te richten en geschiedenis op lokaal nivo haar eigen gezicht te geven. In het geval van de Atlantische kust betekent dit dat we bestaande interpretatiesvan Nicaraguaanse en niet-Nicaraguaanse sociale wetenschappers met een kritisch oog moeten bezien. In hoofdstuk 7 heb ik onder andere betoogd dat een dergelijke benadering een herziening van het enclave-concept inhoudt. Daarnaast heb ik de aandacht gevestigd op de rol van een aantal Atlantische kust familie-ondernemingen die in de periode na de tweede wereld oorlog op de voorgrond traden. Tenslotte heb ik duidelijk gemaakt dat de "moderniserings-fase" zoals in beweging gezet door de Somoza-familie in de jaren na 1950 alleen begrepen kan worden wanneer we kijken naar de wijze waarop "modernisering" op regionaal nivo geinterpreteerd en vorm gegeven werd. Dit zijn slechts enkele van de elementen van de regionale geschiedenis die om uitgebreidere studie vragen en die op het zelfde moment ook vereisen dat we gebruik maken van aangepaste onderzoeks-technieken en op zoek gaan naar nieuwe en tot dusver ongebruikte informatie bronnen. Santiago's Rivas arbeids-carrière is slechts een voorbeeld van het gebruik maken een dergelijke techniek.

De veelzijdige, kleinschalige ekonomie

De drie case-studies van kleinschalige, rurale ondernemingen gevestigd in de zone rondom de stad Bluefields (hoofdstuk 3) tonen zowel de diversiteit als de fragiliteit aan van lokale produktie en reproduktie processen. De geografische geisoleerdheid van de regio, het complexe eco-systeem van het door "Joan" zwaar beschadigde tropisch regenbos en de voortdurende ekonomische crisis in het land hebben geleid tot een eindeloze reeks van breek-punten in het leven van de bevolking. Gekonfronteerd met deze breek-punten proberen mannen, vrouwen en kinderen op de eerste plaats hun beschikbare bronnen zo optimaal mogelijk te gebruiken om familie consumptie behoeften te bevredigen en om een (minimaal) geld-inkomen te verzekeren. Zoals we hebben gezien, slagen niet alle bedrijven erin om deze doelstellingen met een redelijke mate van sukses te realiseren. Daarnaast treden er binnen de huishoud-eenheden/ondernemingen veelvuldig konflikten op betreffende belangen en ideeën.

De "*slash and burn*" produktie in de zone rondom Bluefields is nauw verbonden met de regionale markt en politiek-ekonomische formatie, hoewel de eerder genoemde faktoren een konstante bedreiging vormen voor de instandhouding van relaties met deze markt en formatie. Voor het grote merdendeel van de rurale ondernemingen geldt dat de relaties met de markt bovenal van onregelmatige aard zijn. Zoals de drie case-studies aantonen, verschilt verder de mate van kontrole over deze relaties aanzienlijk tussen de huishoudens/ondernemingen. Deze differentiatie hangt samen met het type onderneming, de eventuele vestiging in Bluefields van een deel van het huishouden, de afstand tussen bedrijf en de stad, en de netwerken van sociaal-ekonomische en politieke relaties die de leden van het huishouden hebben weten op te bouwen. Binnen de huishoudens treedt differentiatie vooral op

grond van leeftijdsverschillen (ouders versus kinderen) en gender-verhoudingen op. Over het algemeen zijn het de mannen die bepalen wat, wanneer en van/aan wie gekocht of verkocht wordt, hoewel steeds meer vrouwen deze ongelijke verhoudingen en rollen openlijk en aktief bekritiseren.

In hoofdstuk 5 heb ik uiteengezet hoe ook de kleinschalige markt- en handelsondernemingen in Bluefields door een grote mate van diversiteit gekenmerkt worden. Middels een meer algemene analyse en een aantal cases heb ik kritiek uitgeoefend of de simplistische en dualistische modellen die deze veelkleurige en uiterst dynamische aktiviteiten opdelen in wettelijk/niet-wettelijke praktijken, informele/formele sektoren of kapitalistische/niet-kapitalistische produktiewijzen. Daarbij wordt al te vlug voorbij gegaan aan het heterogene karakter, de cruciale rol van niet-gecommododitiseerde relaties (zelfs binnen kapitaal-intensieve bedrijven gericht op accumulatie), de invloed van kulturele waarden, en van gender rollen die de wereld van de handel op lokaal nivo kleuren. Aandacht voor deze faktoren dient derhalve de basis van een analyse te vormen. We kunnen ze niet, zoals nog te vaak gebeurt, als simpele bijkomstigheden beschouwen.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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During 1985 and 1986, together with Frans van Gerwen, he carried out research on the question of agrarian reform and peasant organization in the department of Matagalpa, Nicaragua. The results of this research were published by both authors in the form of a report entitled *Producción, organización y reforma agraria: estudio de caso de El Barro, Matagalpa* (Managua: UNAN, 1986) and an article entitled *Het landbouwbeleid in Nicaragua: de stem van de boeren klinkt door* (Tijdschrift voor Sociaalwetenschappelijk Onderzoek van de Landbouw, 1987, 2).

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"To live in the real world was to act without knowing the end. The act of living a real life differed, I mused, from the act of making a fictional one, too, because you were stuck with your mistakes. No revisions, no second drafts. To visit Nicaragua was to be shown that the world was not television, or history, or fiction. The world was real, and this was its actual, unmediated reality."

Salman Rushdie, *The jaguar smile* (1987)